The Thesis committee for Susan Elizabeth Broyles

Certifies that this is the approved version of the following thesis:

No End in Sight:

A Critique of Poptimism's Counter-Hegemonic Aesthetics

APPROVED BY SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:

Supervisor: _____

Janet Staiger

_____

Neil Nehring

No End in Sight:

A Critique of Poptimism's Counter-Hegemonic Aesthetics

by

Susan Elizabeth Broyles, B.A.

Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School

of the University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

December 2010

Acknowledgements

I could not have completed this thesis without the help of my family. My father Tom and stepmother Ellie provided a great deal of encouragement and help. My sister Karen and my mother Beth have not only been supportive, but also helped with the project. I consider myself extremely lucky not only to have both a trained copyeditor and a professional librarian in my family, but that both have been very generous with their time and expertise.

Discussions with friends have helped me to see my subject from new angles, which has been incredibly fruitful. Special thanks go to Bruce Levenstein for referring me to a multitude of useful examples while helping me keep my sense of humor, and to Matthew Perpetua for perspective, encouragement, and welcome distractions.

I would also like to thank the professors I've worked with during my time in the Media Studies program at the University of Texas, especially my thesis advisor, Janet Staiger, who has been a big influence on my intellectual development since I first took a course with her in 1998; my second reader, Neil Nehring; Mary Kearney, for encouraging me to apply to the master's program; and Charles Ramirez Berg, for providing crucial moral support during a difficult point in my studies.

And lastly, I want to thank Brian Sookram. He has been an amazingly helpful, understanding partner throughout the process of writing this thesis. For shoulder rubs, being patient while I panicked, doing extra chores when I had no time for housework, and everything else, I thank him from the bottom of my heart.

No End in Sight: A Critique of Poptimism's Counter-Hegemonic Aesthetics

by
Susan Elizabeth Broyles, MA
The University of Texas at Austin, 2010
SUPERVISOR: Janet Staiger

Poptimism is a school of contemporary popular music criticism characterized by its rejection of the notion of the "guilty pleasure" and traditions within rock journalism called "rockism." Through an examination of poptimist writing, particularly Carl Wilson's "Céline project" (which resulted in a book, *Céline Dion's Let's Talk About Love: A Journey to the End of Taste*) and material on musician Stephin Merritt's comments at the Experience Music Project Pop Conference in 2006, trends emerge: efforts at combating elitism and promoting populism are belied by practices associated with high levels of cultural capital.

These tendencies are examined from three angles. First, following Johan Fornäs, poptimist attitudes toward authenticity and reflexivity are considered. In their treatment of musical texts, poptimists reject rockist notions of authenticity while failing to account for consumers' need for genuineness. Their grasp of reflexivity is greater when it comes to reception; Wilson's project, an exercise in self-scrutiny for elitist bias via an attempt to appreciate the music of Céline Dion, shows the significance of reflexivity for poptimism.

Second, poptimists' approach to identity and difference is considered. Commentary on Merritt, who was accused of racism due to his admitted dislike of certain African-American artists and genres, is typical: oversimplified models of

hegemony undermine deep concern about identity politics. Poptimists' advocacy of omnivorous consumption as an anti-elitist strategy is flawed: using intellectual approaches and spurning the middlebrow are practices associated with high cultural capital. This strategy seems to lead to co-optation rather than real change.

Third, poptimism's relationship to value and emotion is analyzed. Poptimists have doubts about value judgments given traditional aesthetics' hierarchical baggage, yet value judgments are critics' raison d'être. Poptimism's rejection of guilty pleasure and Wilson's "guilty displeasure" concept link aesthetics to affect. Poptimists approach emotion inconsistently, embracing it when convenient but subjecting it to doubt and intellectualization when it seems to support elitism. Like many poptimist strategies, populist ideas motivate this approach, but it emulates hegemonic traditions.

CONTENTS

Chapter One: An Introduction to Poptimism……1

2006: The Year Poptimism Broke (and I Discovered it)....4

Questions About Poptimism: Three Angles....8

My Theoretical Approach....19

Chapter Two: Authenticity and Reflexivity……23

Fornäs and Moore: Authenticity, Reflexivity, the Self, and Others....24

The Specter of Authenticity....32

Authenticity and Reflexivity of Reception....43

Chapter Three: Identity and Difference……53

"Something Unappetizing": Cultural "Borrowing"....60

Highbrow Strategies: Intellectualization and Eschewing the Middlebrow.....70

What is Identity, Anyway?....79

Chapter Four: Value and Emotion……100

Value Judgments: Avoidance in the Classroom, a Brawl in the Hallway.....101

Bad Genres and Bad Musicians....108

Reexamining the Significance of Emotion....120

Conclusion....132

Bibliography....145

Vita....150

Chapter One: An Introduction to Poptimism

Robert Christgau wrote a column in early 1990 summing up the decade just passed, including "the 'rockism' debate" he had recently witnessed in Britain. "Near as a body could tell from here, rockism wasn't just liking Yes and the Allman Brothers—it was liking *London Calling*. It was taking the music seriously, investing any belief at all not just in its self-sufficiency, which is always worth challenging, but in its capacity to change lives or express truth."[1] According to music critic Paul Morley, musician Pete Wylie coined the term rockism in 1981, when he jokingly called for a Race Against Rockism campaign (in response to Rock Against Racism).[2] Morley uses the word rather differently. "Suddenly," Morley writes, "you had a word that you could use to swiftly and yet fairly dismiss Phil Collins, a word you could use to explain why Wire were better than Yes."[3]

Although "rockism" may have been in use in the early 1980s by people like Morley, it only came into common currency much later. Christgau's mention of the term in 1990 is one of the earliest examples of an American taking note of it. But during the 1990s, the term's use became much more commonplace in the United Kingdom with the rise of electronic dance music and rave culture. Popular music scholar Neil Nehring describes this phenomenon from his vantage point as an

---

[1] Robert Christgau, "Decade: Rockism Faces the World," *The Village Voice*, January 2, 1990. Archived at http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/rock/decade-89.php (accessed August 15, 2010).
[2] Paul Morley. "Rockism: it's the new rockism," The Guardian: Brief Encounters, posted May 26, 2006, http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2006/may/26/popandrock.coldplay (accessed August 15, 2010).
[3] Ibid.

American dealing with British exchange students and teaching summer courses in the UK in his article "'Everyone's Given Up and Just Wants to Go Dancing': From Punk to Rave in the Thatcher Era." "From the anti-rockist view of my British students," he writes, "anyone with any sense knew that rock and roll, especially punk rock, was stone dead, and that belief in any potential social significance in popular music was therefore a delusion."[4] Nehring asserts that while "dance culture may have included rhetoric about community, sometimes pitted against Thatcher," in actuality "the devotion of dance fans to personal pleasure clearly belied expressions of a collective sensibility" with their "rampant hedonism . . . paralleling the prevailing politics of self-interest."[5] Rave culture's emphasis on communality may have been belied by its participants' actual priorities, but its rhetoric retained enough potency that rockism seemed problematically individualistic in comparison.

The term gained prevalence toward the beginning of the twenty-first century on message boards like those at www.ilxor.com, then came to the attention of a much wider audience with *New York Times* critic Kelefa Sanneh's 2004 article "The Rap Against Rockism." "The rockism debate began in earnest in the early 1980's," Sanneh wrote, "but over the past few years it has heated up, and today, in certain

[4] Neil Nehring. "'Everyone's Given Up and Just Wants to Go Dancing': From Punk to Rave in the Thatcher Era." *Popular Music and Society,* 30:1 (2007): 1–18.
[5] Ibid.

impassioned circles, there is nothing worse than a rockist."[6] He elaborates on the meaning of the term:

> A rockist isn't just someone who loves rock'n'roll, who goes on and on about Bruce Springsteen, who champions ragged-voiced singer-songwriters no one has ever heard of. A rockist is someone who reduces rock'n'roll to a caricature, then uses that caricature as a weapon. Rockism means idolizing the authentic old legend (or underground hero) while mocking the latest pop star; lionizing punk while barely tolerating disco; loving the live show and hating the music video; extolling the growling performer while hating the lip-syncher.[7]

Sanneh noted he was responding to an already existing debate—he wrote, "much of the most energetic resistance to rockism can be found online, in blogs and on critic-infested sites . . . where debates about rockism have become so common that the term itself is something of a running joke."[8] His article brought this debate out of internet forums and into the critical mainstream. As Jody Rosen put it, he "took a long-running conversation in music-wonk circles to the pages of the Gray Lady."[9]

---

[6] Kalefa Sanneh, "The Rap Against Rockism," *The New York Times*, October 31, 2004, http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/31/arts/music/31sann.html?ex=1256965200&en=5d74c31cbf3d2d34&ei=5090&partner=rssuserland (accessed August 15, 2010).
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Jody Rosen. "The Perils of Poptimism: Does hating rock make you a music critic?" *Slate*, May 9, 2006, http://www.slate.com/id/2141418 (accessed August 4, 2010).

2006: The Year Poptimism Broke (and I Discovered It)

It was within these "music-wonk circles" that the terms "poptimism" or "popism" began being used to describe one school of thought that was critical of rockism. Then the debate over rockism and the idea of "poptimism" garnered a great deal more attention after a number of stories came out in the wake of the 2006 Experience Music Project (EMP) Pop Conference. As Rosen wrote soon afterward, during this conference "rockism talk was so prevalent that it became a kind of running gag: When the *Los Angeles Times'* Ann Powers invoked the term in her paper, she quipped, 'Got it in there!'"[10] One factor that contributed to this was the conference's theme: "'Ain't That a Shame': Loving Music in the Shadow of Doubt," which corresponded to what Rosen calls "the wholesale rejection of 'guilty pleasures . . . a hallmark of the anti-rockist backlash."[11]

Two things happened at this conference that sparked discussion among music journalists, bloggers, and fans for a long time afterward and which helped to shape discourse about poptimism from that point forward. Musician Stephin Merritt of the band the Magnetic Fields made some comments on a panel that certain music journalists seized upon as evidence of racism, as detailed in John Cook's *Slate* article "Blacklisted: Is Stephin Merritt a racist because he doesn't like hip-hop?"[12] First,

---

[10] Rosen, "The Perils of Poptimism."
[11] Ibid.
[12] John Cook, "Blacklisted: Is Stephin Merrit a racist because he doesn't like hip-hop?" *Slate,* May 9, 2006, http://www.slate.com/id/2141421.

Merritt said "Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah," from Disney's *Song of the South*, was "a great song" (although his detractors failed to note that he also said of the film, "The rest of it is terrible, actually."). Then he mistakenly referred to Céline Dion as black. Critics who had already claimed Merritt was a racist for other reasons (which Cook summarized thus: "he doesn't like hip-hop, and on those occasions when he's publicly discussed his personal music tastes, he has criticized black artists") took his comments at the conference as further evidence of prejudice.[13]

At the same conference, Canadian music critic Carl Wilson presented a paper, coincidentally centering on Dion as an instructive example, which ignited the debate over poptimism. "There's no such thing as a guilty pleasure, say the 'poptimists,'" the abstract for his talk says, ". . . But what about distastes? Say I shiver with revulsion when I hear my compatriot Céline Dion ululate My Heart Will Go On, 1999's titanically successful Titanic theme. Is this somehow a more pure value judgement, or should there be such a thing as a guilty displeasure?"[14] Although Wilson refers to "the 'poptimists'" not only in third person but with scare-quotes, he both adopts their rejection of the guilty pleasure and adds the corresponding notion of the guilty displeasure in all sincerity. Few music critics explicitly self-identify as poptimists or popists, but I would argue Wilson clearly fits the bill and implies as much himself in this passage.

---

[13] Ibid.

[14] Experience Music Project, "2006 Pop Conference Bios/Abstracts," http://www.empsfm.org/education/index.asp?categoryID=26&ccID=127&xPopConfBioID=660&year=2006. Formatting and spelling from the original has been retained.

Far from simply theorizing about "guilty displeasure," Wilson proposed to engage in an experiment to find out whether such suspect dislikes could be changed. He announced his intention to undertake something called "the Céline project," during which he would attempt to challenge, and hopefully overcome, his antipathy toward Dion's music. This undertaking eventually led to the writing of a book, *Let's Talk About Love: A Journey to the End of Taste*.

When the fallout from the 2006 EMP Pop Conference began to spill out into music columns and music critic blogs, I was a bored receptionist working in the Civil Engineering department at the University of Texas. I read a lot of music writing online during my copious downtime at work, from newspaper articles like Sanneh's piece, articles from online magazines like *Slate,* including Cook's and Rosen's responses to the conference, and numerous blogs by critics from Wilson to Simon Reynolds, an outspoken critic of poptimism. The conversation that followed the conference was my introduction to the terms rockism and poptimism, as I believe it was for many others, and I became fascinated with the discourse surrounding them.

As a fan of Merritt's music, I had an investment in defending him, but as someone interested in the politics of race, I also believed in the importance of exploring the racial dimension of taste. My initial reaction to the idea of a "guilty displeasure" was to find it absurd, but the critique of old standards of taste struck a chord with me. As I hashed out my own views on these issues in conversations with friends and on my personal blog on livejournal.com, I was excited about the ideas these debates brought up, but I felt frustrated with my limited ability to make sense

of them. I picked up books I had not read in a long time and thought back to courses I had taken years before. I felt these questions demanded a more systematic approach than they were receiving in the journalistic pieces and blog entries I was reading, an approach I began to realize would only be afforded by an academic perspective. This thought process coincided with a number of other events in my life at the time, including taking free courses using the University's staff educational benefit, which together convinced me to apply to graduate school and pursue my master's degree in media studies.

Clearly, I have an investment in this topic. I find the poptimist project intriguing and sympathize with many of its aims, while taking issue with many of the conclusions drawn by its adherents. And I believe by exploring these questions through rigorous academic research and writing one can avoid many of these questionable conclusions. This is not to say academic work is more valid or defensible than the work of journalists. Actually, my exploration of this area has led me to believe that the greater freedom journalists enjoy makes it possible for them to come up with more up-to-date, original ideas than can be readily advanced in academic circles. Nevertheless, I think poptimist ideas could benefit greatly from more academic attention in cooperation with the debates of journalists and fans. Many journalists whose work I have examined make spurious assumptions, "reinvent the wheel" when musing about phenomena that have been well articulated in academic contexts, or attempt to back their ideas up with academic theories in their work but mischaracterize them due to careless reading. An active

dialogue between journalists and academics, in which both focus on what they do better, would result in more fruitful work on the important questions raised by the debates around poptimism. Hence this thesis is an attempt to apply rigorous academic work to an exploration of poptimist thought and the critique of rockism.

Questions About Poptimism: Three Angles

My main goal in this exploration will be to answer the following question: Does poptimist music criticism attempt to exempt itself from systems of cultural capital and privilege? If so, what can we learn from its successes and failures? The idea of "guilty displeasure," isolated by Wilson but symptomatic of poptimism more generally, dictates that we ought to second-guess initial dislikes and interrogate them for signs of elitism or privilege. The more we dislike something, particularly if our dislike is very pronounced or visceral, the more suspicious we ought to be. But how is a school of criticism to function if, in its most extreme form, it essentially outlaws negative evaluations? Does second-guessing aesthetic inclinations on the basis of political arguments effectively combat elitism or privilege? The timing of poptimism's development and the way it has evolved could tell us a lot about contemporary anxieties about privilege, taste, and authenticity. Its critique of rockism shows the degree to which a dominant old critical idiom failed to address these concerns. But how well do the poptimists address them? Their attempts to do so are illuminating but problematic.

I will pursue these questions by analyzing poptimist discourse from a variety of sources in books, newspapers, magazines, websites and blogs. Prominent critics whom I am classifying as poptimists include Wilson, Frank Kogan, Sasha Frere-Jones, and Tom Ewing. I will also be considering the work of other journalists such as Reynolds, Alec Hanley Bemis, and Ann Powers. I will apply a variety of theories about aesthetics and taste and their relationship to cultural capital and systems of privilege and will put poptimist work into dialogue with contemporary popular music scholarship.

Chapter Two will be on the subject of authenticity and reflexivity. In his well-known article "Listen to Your Voice!" Johan Fornäs explores the relationship between these two concepts.[15] He points out that a reflexive relationship to musical personae on the part of artists, including self-aware acknowledgment of their constructedness, both undermines and supports their perceived authenticity in an era when claims of absolute, unconstructed authenticity seem suspect.[16] Taking a cue from Fornäs, I will explore how the interrelated concepts of authenticity and reflexivity come into play in poptimist discourse and contemporary scholarship. Fornäs explored their relationship within the presentation of musical artists; I would also like to explore how critics' (and by extension fans') self-awareness about the suspect nature of some authenticity claims might apply to their reception practices.

---

[15] Johan Fornäs. "Listen to Your Voice! Authenticity and Reflexivity in Rock, Rap and Techno Music." *New Formations* 24 (1994).
[16] Ibid., 168–9, 172.

One of the most significant critiques leveled against rockism is its dependence on problematic notions of authenticity, which correspond to its disdain for blatantly market-driven genres like pop. According to the Wikipedia entry on rockism, "the fundamental tenet of rockism is that some forms of popular music, and some musical artists, are more authentic than others."[17] The critique of rockism suggests the presence of contemporary anxiety about old notions of authenticity; one need only look at the contemporary musical landscape to see evidence of this.

Although some music fans have abandoned traditional notions of authenticity along with poptimist critics, many have continued to seek it out in various forms. As Simon Frith points out in his book *Performing Rites*, the importance of authenticity and conventions about what signals denote it vary according to genres and their corresponding taste communities: "'Authenticity' in this context is a quality not of the music as such (how it is actually made) but of the story it is heard to tell, the narrative of musical interaction in which the listeners place themselves."[18] Genres such as experimental or electronic music may appeal to fans because their inaccessibility seems to guarantee a degree of authenticity; one recent musical trend has been an increasing number of groups that combine

---

[17] "Rockism," Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rockism (accessed March 15, 2009).
Please note: This sentence is footnoted "citation needed" and the article is headed with a note stating that "editors are currently in dispute concerning points of view expressed in this article." This disagreement over terms and the difficulty in finding clear citations to back up assertions is characteristic of discussions of rockism.
[18] Simon Frith. *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 275.

elements of experimental music with more traditional rock/pop song structures. The recent rise of emo music shows that many listeners, particularly younger ones, still value emotional expression. The genre's over-the-top intensity suggests that an added charge may be needed to sell emotionalism to present-day fans. One recent musical fad, a genre called "freak folk," features quirky performers playing acoustic instruments (an ersatz version of the musical "outsider art" of emotionally troubled artists like Daniel Johnston); the artists are portrayed as so naïve and kooky that they are incapable of self-interested posturing.

While these trends point to music fans' continued interest in music they perceive as authentic, they also imply that listeners who pursue authenticity have had to up the ante, that the old singer-songwriter model has begun to seem insufficient. While some have attempted to abandon such claims entirely, these fans and many of the critics who cover the genres they favor have responded to anxiety about authenticity by investing in types of music that seem more assuredly authentic according to traditional markers like market autonomy and inaccessibility. Clearly, the poptimist critique is just one sign that old notions of musical authenticity have become painfully outdated.

Another popular music scholar, Allan Moore, has responded to the debate over authenticity by defending the concept itself while acknowledging problems with old standards. As I will explain in more detail in my extended discussion, Moore points out how the notion of authenticity means very different things in different contexts. Moore seeks to analyze "three senses" of authenticity that are

often conflated: "that artists speak the truth of their own situation; that they speak the truth of the situation of (absent) others; and that they speak the truth of their own culture, thus representing (present) others."[19] Moore's emphasis on the truth *of others* points to an important component in discussions of musical authenticity: its relationship to discussions of privilege and identity politics.

This leads directly to Chapter Three, which is on identity and difference. In my research on the relationship between identity and musical taste, I ran into the same assertion in any number of books and articles: aligning oneself with certain types of music and certain musicians is supposed to help constitute and support a constructed social identity (a position clearly informed by the work of Pierre Bourdieu). For example, Frith writes that "if social relations are constituted in cultural practice, then our sense of identity and difference is established in the process of discrimination. And this is as important for popular as for bourgeois cultural activity."[20] Wilson echoes such scholarly claims (and at times quotes them verbatim) in *Let's Talk About Love*, such as when he writes, "musical subcultures exist because our guts tell us certain kinds of music are for certain kinds of people. The codes are not always transparent. . . .But it's hard not to notice how those processes reflect and contribute to self-definition, how often persona and musical taste happen to jibe."[21] Such critiques of taste not only connect aesthetic judgments

---

[19] Allan Moore. "Authenticity as Authentication," *Popular Music* 21 (2002): 209.
[20] Frith. *Performing Rites,* 18.
[21] Carl Wilson. *Céline Dion's Let's Talk About Love: A Journey to the End of Taste.* (New York: Continuum Publishing Group, 2007), 17.

with identity, they also constitute an interesting twist on concerns about authenticity, bringing not only the credibility of musical texts into question but personal taste as well.

In the nineteenth installment of Ewing's "Poptimist" column on the influential music site Pitchfork, he enters into similar territory:

> Teenage market research gurus TRU recently did some work on British youth . . . asking them a question about what factors led them to try something new. "Everyone else likes it" was one option among many. "No one else likes it" was another. Older kids picked both in roughly equal proportions: I suspect they were showing more honesty and self-knowledge than most adults would.[22]

Ewing's piece points out an important aspect of the relationship between musical taste and identity: it is not only about identifying with certain music in support of a given identity but also about difference—about distinguishing oneself from people one wishes not to identify with by not liking certain music.

In a similar vein, Deena Weinstein argues in "Rock Critics Need Bad Music" that adolescent experiences shape music critics' attitudes toward certain genres. "The rock critics and their readers originate in the cliques that affirm themselves by being 'hip' and 'cool,' superior in their sophistication and depth," she writes, and the "weapon" that "the hipoisie crowd" uses to make up for a deficit of social status is

---

[22] Tom Ewing. "Poptimist #19: Fated to Pretend," http://pitchfork.com/features/poptimist/7549-poptimist-19/ (accessed June 13, 2010).

"the tried-and-true approach of those with pretension to refinement, intellect and superior discernment—snobbery."[23]

Wilson explores his own adolescence in *Let's Talk About Love* as part of a personal "taste biography."[24] "I remember at age twelve telling people I liked 'all kinds of music, *except* disco and country,' two genres I now adore," he writes.[25] He then adds that after gaining an appreciation for both genres later in life, he realized "my blind spots were a regional and cultural bias," and "my easy scorn had betrayed an ignorance of whole communities and ways of life, prejudices I did not want to live with."[26] Given that among the "social experiences" that caused him to reconsider these genres was "dancing in Montreal gay clubs where body-rocking techno mixed seamlessly into disco classics," I think Wilson is implying that his dislike of disco could have had a homophobic component (or if not, perhaps he should be).[27] In addition to the "regional and cultural bias," dislike of country music could also be attributed to classism or elitism.

Wilson takes an inverse approach in his attempt to appreciate Dion, emphasizing her Québécois heritage (giving readers an impromptu history lesson on Québécois oppression in the process) and her working-class background—in effect, casting her as an "other." In Moore's terms, Wilson asserts that Dion

---

[23] Deena Weinstein, "Rock Critics Need Bad Music," in *Bad Music: The Music We Love to Hate*, ed. Christopher J. Washburne and Maiken Derno (New York: Routledge, 2004), 306.
[24] Wilson, *Let's Talk About Love,* 15.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid.

represents "others" by "speak[ing] the truth of [her] own culture." Wilson also aligns her with "(absent) others" by recounting the story of the Larry King interview in which she famously made supportive comments about New Orleans looters ("'Some of the people who do that, they're so poor they've never touched anything in their life. *Let them touch those things for once!*'").[28] It is as if Wilson feels better equipped to appreciate and defend Dion if he can paint her as part of an underprivileged group or cast her as an underdog.

Although he seems to be dancing around the idea for much of his book, Wilson never explicitly links the type of "displeasure" he thinks we ought to feel guilty about with racism or homophobia or any of the other –isms and –phobias associated with positions of cultural privilege. Nevertheless, I think when he refers to "ignorance of whole communities and ways of life" reflected in a dislike of certain genres, this is what he clearly implies.

One critic who does not avoid making accusations of privilege is Frere-Jones. Frere-Jones was one of the writers who criticized Merritt both before and after his comments at the EMP conference in 2006. This was not the first time he had taken issue with Merritt's musical taste. In May 2004 he posted an angry response on his blog to the *New York Times* feature "Playlist," which had recently featured Merritt being asked for a list of recommended albums. In his blogged response, Frere-Jones called Merritt "a rockist cracker" and accused him of displaying a racist and misogynist bias.

---

[28] Ibid., 37

Wilson confines his examples of bias to anecdotes about his own "taste biography," like a good communicator who only uses "I-statements," and avoids explicitly mentioning highly charged types of bias such as racism. Frere-Jones has no qualms about asserting that Merritt is a racist. But despite the differences in their approaches, their skepticism about judgments of taste is very similar.

Kogan describes a similar identification with a downtrodden group, which he relates to his appreciation for Paris Hilton in a blog entry famous (and infamous) for containing the slogan "Paris is Our Vietnam."[29] He relates an anecdote from his youth, detailing how he switched from supporting the war in Vietnam to opposing it in large part because of a news report he heard about "an antiwar demonstration where the peaceful demonstrators were attacked by a stone-throwing mob," causing him to doubt his previous belief that "we were the good guys in Vietnam" and conclude, "I didn't want to be on the side of the stone-throwers." [30]

In a similar way, Kogan explains, he does not want to be on the side of people who are attacking Hilton (when he wrote the piece in the summer of 2007, anti-Hilton sentiment was particularly high). He writes, "the point isn't that these social reasons cause me to like her sound — and anyway I liked her album before I realized the virulence of the hatred towards her — but it certainly opens me to

---

[29] Frank Kogan, "Rules Of The Game Followup #2: Paris Is Our Vietnam," Las Vegas Weekly News Blog, June 29, 2007, http://www.lasvegasweekly.com/news/archive/2007/jun/11/rules-of-the-game-followup-2-paris-is-our-vietnam (accessed May 26, 2010).
[30] Ibid.

liking what I hear."[31] Wilson might cast a skeptical eye at Kogan's interest in defining himself as different from others through his interest in Hilton. Yet his attempt to use this distinction to distance himself from objectionable mainstream sentiments and position himself as an ally to a figure he sees as being unfairly attacked means Kogan's approach to Hilton bears a strong resemblance to Wilson's orientation toward Dion.

Wilson's seeming interest in identifying with "others" and Kogan's alignment with figures he perceives as downtrodden are hardly novel in the history of musical taste. Taste has long been a means for audiences to identify with less privileged groups. The history of blackness as a popular musical signifier, for one, provides a multitude of examples, and scholarly explorations of these abound. But the self-conscious revision of value judgments on the basis of political concerns advocated by poptimist critics is relatively unprecedented. In the section of my thesis on identity and difference, I will look closely at a number of poptimist writings and how they deal with these issues, putting them in context with related scholarly work in popular music studies.

Chapter Four is on value and emotion and will explore musical value judgments in more specific detail. Value judgments are a tricky area for anyone who makes a living (or just spends free time) studying culture, from literature faculty making decisions about what readings to assign to music critics deciding what to put on their ballot for the Pazz & Jop poll (a yearly critics' poll run by *The Village*

[31] Kogan, "Paris Is Our Vietnam."

Voice). But value judgments are about more than just deciding what is good; they also involve deciding some things are bad. Weinstein's central argument in "Rock Critics Need Bad Music" (the title of which speaks for itself) is that traditional music criticism is particularly dependent upon consigning certain music, even entire genres, to abject status.

This is one of the main points where poptimist criticism differs from more traditional approaches: the rejection of the guilty pleasure and the notion of the guilty displeasure problematize judgments of value and potentially outlaw negative judgments. At times value and badness seem confused, even inverted. In fact, Wilson admits to some reservations in the opening chapter of *Let's Talk About Love*: "Maybe I am heading down a relativistic rabbit hole. If even Céline can be redeemed, is there no good or bad taste, or good and bad art?"[32] Music critic Simon Reynolds, who is well known for his critical take on poptimism, likened Wilson's Céline project to a "Maoist self-criticism session" in which "party members and low-level bureaucrats calling themselves and others out for their crypto-bourgeois tendencies" and wrote that it represented a "new frontier of fretful self-cancellation."[33]

This brings me to the other topic of my final chapter: emotion. Poptimism's approach to emotions is complex and contradictory, and it illustrates the complex relationship between affect and value judgments. By engaging in an intellectual

---

[32] Wilson, *Let's Talk About Love*, 20.
[33] Simon Reynolds, "Thinking about that Greil Marcus quote that got uTopianTurtleTop riled up," Blissblog, posted June 1, 2006, http://blissout.blogspot.com/2006/06/thinking-about-that-greil-marcus-quote.html (accessed July 23, 2010).

attempt to appreciate music he finds viscerally repellent, Wilson privileges the rational over the emotional. Yet he champions the emotional immediacy of Dion's music against charges of crass sentimentality, and the pinnacle of his appreciation for her work comes when he feels genuinely moved at a live performance by Dion. This inconsistency is characteristic of Wilson's book, which in turn is characteristic of the attitudes of many poptimist critics.

The skepticism Wilson applies to his own reactions are mirrored in the skepticism Frere-Jones applies to Merritt and the "magical, coincidence-prone scythe" that allows him to choose seven new records to recommend that all happen to be made by white artists. When replacing affective reactions with reasoned arguments, this critical mindset seems to reach toward an ideal of greater objectivity. Yet, as I have discussed, the poptimist program raises concerns about a different sort of relativism, which replaces concerns about elitist bias with a critical methodology which Wilson himself admits leads down a confusing "rabbit hole" when it comes to textual value.

My Theoretical Approach

Poptimist writing on these topics raises an important point: looking closely at the ways in which our tastes are intertwined with hegemonic hierarchies is disturbing. What do we do when we realize our personal status as formed through taste credentials—a dimension of our identity of which we repress our awareness while we semi-consciously slave away to build it—seems to implicate us in a system

of privilege? What does the discomfort created by this awareness say about our relationship to identity, privilege, and cultural capital in contemporary culture? Wilson's project, and indeed much of poptimist writing, revolves around this discomfort and various attempts to step around it.

At one time, these sorts of questions might have been reserved for the academy. Contiuum published Wilson's book as part of 33 1/3, a series of tiny volumes that are each dedicated to a specific album and are primarily sold in music shops. When this sort of book quotes Bourdieu and refers to contemporary cognitive psychology work on "framing," it represents a shift in the relationship between academic and journalistic discourses on popular music. This shift has the potential to bring exciting new ideas and an added degree of political awareness and criticality to journalistic discourse, but it also has more burdensome consequences. Making value judgments about music is in many respects the popular music journalist's raison d'être. Delving into certain questions could be like taking an apple from the tree of knowledge—how does one continue to write music reviews while taking a "journey to the end of taste"?

I believe an academic approach to these questions with a thorough analysis of poptimist discourse has the potential to further our understanding of these questions in a meaningful way. Journalists' freedom, especially in blogs, to spout off on these topics with unapologetic stridency is beneficial in some respects. Part of what makes poptimist writing so compelling is that it brings up salient questions that have been almost entirely ignored in academic work on popular music, and I

think their ability to express these ideas without all of the checks and balances and built-in delays of academic writing facilitated this. But when journalists try to approximate academic coverage of these topics, the free-wheeling, out-of-context theoretical bricolage that usually results tends to mangle existing scholarly ideas without providing clear support for an argument. These issues cry out for a more rigorous, theoretically informed treatment—which is where *my* project comes in.

To put it simply, my goal is a discourse analysis of poptimist texts and responses to poptimism. This type of discourse analysis comes out of a tradition typified recently by Michel Foucault. While arguing for and against aspects of poptimism is a worthwhile task and one I will engage in at times, my aim is something deeper—to understand the context in which poptimist discourse has become possible, even inevitable, and by placing it in context to reach toward a greater understanding of the important political issues that animate it.

It is easy to see that discourse shapes aesthetics and journalism. But contemporary theories and debates about gender, race and sexuality show how they are also discursively produced and in turn shape and limit thought and discussion. Instead of embroiling myself in the music critic turf war over poptimism, I will aim for a more critical perspective (without pretensions of total objectivity) that attempts to account for the conditions surrounding the dialogue.

Another important theoretical component of my analysis will be cultural studies scholarship informed by Antonio Gramsci, including work by Stuart Hall and Frith. Given cultural studies' strong grasp of identity issues, engagement with

popular culture, and emphasis on the political, this type of theory is very well suited to understanding poptimism.

Approaches to popular culture that emphasize fan activity have elements in common with cultural studies. Both schools focus on the reception side of the cultural equation and on the agency of consumers to make meaning. Appropriately, work by scholars of fandom such as Henry Jenkins and Jonathan Fiske will also come into play in my analysis.

I will also be engaging with theories in the tradition of Bourdieu, who recently cultivated the sociological study of aesthetic taste. Richard A. Peterson and Roger M. Kern, authors of a prescient piece on omnivorous cultural consumption, and Jason Middleton and Roger Beebe, whose work in a similar vein elaborates on contemporary reception practices, provide a context for my analysis. In a similar vein, my investigation will also be informed by work that places "bad" genres like heavy metal, country, and schmaltz in a sociohistorical context.

Naturally, scholarship from the popular music studies field more generally will also come into play. As I have mentioned, in addition to the aforementioned material on omnivorous reception and abject genres, studies of authenticity and the discourse surrounding it by writers like Fornäs and Moore will be highly significant to my inquiry.

Now, time to dive into that rabbit hole . . .

Chapter Two: Authenticity and Reflexivity

Fittingly, my first stop beyond the rabbit hole will be to approach the looking-glass of reflexivity. I will take a cue from Johan Fornäs, author of "Listen to Your Voice! Authenticity and Reflexivity in Rock, Rap and Techno Music," who details the relationship between reflexivity and authenticity, a concept which continues to command a great deal of attention despite connotations of rockism.

Authenticity has other negative associations as well. As I will show during this chapter, traditional versions of the concept have become problematic during late modernity—yet it remains fraught with significance. Fornäs's work will form the framework of my discussion, along with related work by fellow popular music scholar Allan Moore. Of particular interest to my discussion is Fornäs's notion of "meta-authenticity," which he describes as occurring when cultural texts show an awareness of their own symbolic context and, in the process, their own artificiality. Moore provides an additional focus on authenticity's relationship to identity and difference. I will use both Fornäs's and Moore's models to examine differing attitudes toward authenticity among poptimist critics and to demonstrate the significance of reflexivity in contemporary estimations of authenticity and value.

I will also take a look at poptimist writing on authenticity in reception. The legitimacy and sincerity of value judgments are an integral part of poptimist critiques of taste; while they avoid evoking authenticity by name, the spirit of the term infuses their discussions. In the process, I will examine the sometimes contradictory attitudes poptimist critics hold toward reflexivity.

Fornäs and Moore: Authenticity, Reflexivity, the Self, and Others

Fornäs begins his groundbreaking essay by describing Lawrence Grossberg's scheme in which he lays out three types of authenticity. The first is based on Romantic ideology and its opposition of authenticity against commercial appeal, which is linked with rock music; the second applies to "dance-oriented and black genres" which finds authenticity "in the construction of a rhythmical and sexual individual body"; and the third "appears in postmodernist self-conscious pop and avant-garde rock" whose "very self-knowledge, in all its cynicism, shows a kind of realistic honesty."[34]

Fornäs reformulates these types slightly to suit his own purposes. The first he terms "*social authenticity*, since it uses criteria taken from the level of collective group interaction" and the second he calls "*subjective authenticity*, since it focuses on the relation between an individual performer and/or listener and her own mind and body, as a state of presence."[35] Both, he points out "stress either source or reception authenticity, with textual authenticity as a silent presumption."[36] "The third form," he writes, "could be defined as *cultural or meta-authenticity*, since it moves within (and derives legitimacy from) the level of the symbolic expressions

[34] Johan Fornäs. "Listen to Your Voice! Authenticity and Reflexivity in Rock, Rap and Techno Music." *New Formations* 24 (1994): 168.
[35] Ibid., 168.
[36] Ibid., 168.

('texts') themselves."[37] Unlike the first two types, meta-authenticity deals with the authenticity of texts themselves rather than that of their producers or audiences.[38]

This third form of authenticity is Fornäs's primary focus. He maintains that its significance is an inevitable consequence of the conditions of present-day late modernity:

> It is almost impossible any more to repress the insight that this takes place through a complicated play of gestures, signs and strategies. Actually, unlike in earlier times, one now has the best chance to attain social and subjective authenticity if the symbolic contexts are made conscious. Modernization has irreversibly made reflexivity an inescapable condition of all cultural activities.[39]

In other words, our awareness of the context of musical texts makes it impossible for us to believe in traditional notions of authenticity, but the reflexivity this awareness brings about actually reinforces authenticity, but in a new and different way. Fornäs "agree[s] with many other critics that the old tradition of romantic rock-ideology is today luckily in decline" but suggests that "instead of throwing away the concept of authenticity" because it is used in such suspect ways by rock Romanticism, we should "rethink" it.[40]

---

[37] Ibid., 168.
[38] Ibid., 168.
[39] Ibid., 169.
[40] Ibid., 172.

> Authenticity does not have to be defined as naturalness or as related to any absolute and autonomous origin, but can instead fruitfully refer to a specifically constructed relation between subjects and cultural expressions . . . Reflexivity need not be restricted only to intellectual reflections nor imply any total self-transparency, but may indicate any symbolically mediated reference to one's own identity. . . . it seems to me that the increasing reflexivity of late modern life and popular music does not erode authenticity—it only changes its forms. Authenticity today cannot be achieved without reflexivity, nor can it be defined as a given entity.[41]

Thus, in Fornäs's view, by acknowledging its symbolic context (and in the process its own artificiality) music can attain some kind of authenticity for late-modern listeners.

The complex relationship between authenticity and reflexivity which he describes may seem counter-intuitive to anyone steeped in the traditional notions of authenticity that built up around rock music in the latter part of the twentieth century (which Fornäs criticizes as "essentialist").[42] "Reflexivity may be felt as inducing artificiality" to some, Fornäs points out, but he believes that it is not only "intimately connected to authenticity" but indispensable to it if it is to remain a relevant concept under present conditions.[43] It is tempting to look for authenticity in the most guileless performers and thus to "value pre-modern, youthful or naïve

[41] Ibid., 172-3.
[42] Ibid., 172.
[43] Ibid., 172.

musics as more authentic," but "it could however be argued that it is exactly the unconscious voice that runs the greatest risk of getting inauthentic, steered by uncontrollable external forces in nature, culture and society."[44] On the contrary, Fornäs says, "Only by carefully listening to your voice, reflecting upon one's limits and potentials, might it be possible to gain a real, active subjectivity" and thus a more genuine degree of authenticity.[45]

In his piece 'Authenticity as Authentication,' Allan Moore both expands on and reacts to Fornäs's ideas. Like Fornäs, he writes that he starts "from an assumption that authenticity does not inhere in any combination of musical sounds" but rather that "'[a]uthenticity' is a matter of interpretation which is made and fought for from within a cultural and, thus, historicised position. It is ascribed, not inscribed."[46] Given this, he asks, "where does it lie? It is my second assumption in this article that it is a construction made on the act of listening." He acknowledges that there is a great deal of skepticism about the legitimacy of the very idea of authenticity, quoting Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh's assertion that "the concept 'has been consigned to the intellectual dust-heap' since, in a postmodern world where appropriation . . . is everywhere evident, it no longer carries its

[44] Ibid., 155.
[45] Ibid., 155.
[46] Allan Moore. "Authenticity as Authentication," *Popular Music* 21 (2002), 210.

originary force."[47] But Moore nonetheless finds that "such an abandonment is premature."[48]

Moore finds authenticity useful not as a descriptor for concrete musical qualities but as a way of explaining a certain kind of relationship between listeners and texts (harking back to the first two types of authenticity outlined by Fornäs). "Theorisation of observations made on how things count as authentic will in turn inform the question of how such observers constitute their subjectivity. Thus, rather than ask *what* (piece of music, or activity) is being authenticated, in this article I ask *who*."[49]

Moore recognizes three theoretically valid forms of authenticity, which occur given one of three things: "that artists speak the truth of their own situation; that they speak the truth of the situation of (absent) others; [or] that they speak the truth of their own culture, thereby representing (present) others."[50] The first he terms "first person authenticity" or "authenticity of expression"; it can be found in cases where "an originator (composer, performer) succeeds in conveying the impression that his/her utterance is one of integrity, that it represents an attempt to communicate in an unmediated form with an audience."[51]

He also delineates a "'second person' authenticity, or authenticity of experience, which occurs when a performance succeeds in conveying the

---

[47] Ibid., 210.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid., 210.
[50] Ibid., 209.
[51] Ibid., 214.

impression to a listener that that listener's experience of life is being validated."[52] The third option, "third person authenticity," takes place when the audience is convinced that an artist is conveying a truthful account of the experiences of another (or an Other); the example Moore uses to flesh out this idea—that of white performers' appropriation of the African-American blues tradition—is both apt and telling.[53]

Although the three types of authenticity Moore delineates are specific, they remain incredibly subjective—intentionally so. Although it would be beyond the scope of a single article to describe in the necessary detail exactly how and why certain people or groups might find different musical texts authentic in one of these ways, Moore does mention that he believes one factor is popular music discourse itself:

> While the question of why particular (groups of) listeners give value to some musical experiences above others may depend on what music connotes or denotes, it also depends on how the musical experience is constructed around a basic distinction which may be summarised as mainstream/margin, centre/periphery, or coopted/underground. The basic distinction most relevant at this point is that which originated in the mid-1960s between a popular music centre ("pop") and periphery ("rock"), concerning as it did the nature of the commercial enterprise surrounding examples of each particular style: the degree

[52] Ibid., 219.
[53] Ibid., 214-6.

> to which it could be perceived as "authentic". Dispassionately speaking, of course, this commercial/authentic polarity is illusory, since all mass-mediated music is subject to commercial imperatives, but what matters to listeners is whether such subjection appears to be accepted, resisted, or negotiated with, by those to whom they are listening.[54]

He believes "the burning question," which "is one of belonging," is viewed through the lens of these sorts of perceived polarities.

These linked sets of opposing concepts not only date back to the rise of the pop/rock distinction in the 1960s, as Moore points out, but also have antecedents in even older aesthetic traditions. Such terms come up continually in academic literature about popular music aesthetics. In his book *Rhythm and Noise,* Theodore Gracyk mentions a similar grouping of terms much like Moore's: "rock and pop, entertainment and art, authenticity and insincerity, and the marginal and the commercial."[55] In a piece on reflexivity in youth culture, Fornäs describes this opposition of "commercial and technological artificiality" on the one hand, as that "which is supposed to destroy natural authenticity of genuine, rooted, live culture," and on the other, is "a central part of the self-understanding of rock in relation to

[54] Ibid., 218.
[55] Theodore Gracyk. *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock.* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 226.

pop" but writes that "it goes back to the ancient nature/culture-dichotomy and in fact turns up in new forms within virtually every genre."[56]

Often, academic discussions problematize these oppositions. For example, in his article "Producing Artistic Value: The Case of Rock Music," Motti Regev argues "that the discourse about rock music which has been developed . . . has gradually constructed distinctions and hierarchies which resulted from the application of the traditional ideology of autonomous art."[57] He points to "changes in the status of film and photography" as "evidence to the successful struggles which producers and analyzers of 'popular' forms have conducted over the recognition of these forms as 'artistic' . . . They did so as part of the field, and by accepting its rules. . . . the struggles were not conducted against the existing parameters of art, but on the basis of adherence to the belief in them."[58]

In other words, though the texts produced by these forms are easily commodified, they have achieved a degree of cultural capital previously reserved for "autonomous" art (art that, theoretically at least, is untainted by profit motives) by conforming to discursive strategies employed around such traditionally "high" art forms (or, in Bourdieu's terms, playing the cultural capital field according to its long-standing rules). John Fiske makes a similar point in "The Cultural Economy of Fandom" when he writes that when fans have advocated for the artistic legitimacy

---

[56] Johan Fornäs. "Do You See Yourself? Reflected Subjectivities in Youthful Song Texts." *Young: Nordic Journal of Youth Research* 3, no. 2, (1995), 3.
[57] Motti Regev. "Producing Artistic Value: The Case of Rock Music." *The Sociological Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (1994), 86.
[58] Ibid., 87.

of the texts they love, "their criteria . . . were not dissimilar to those of the literary scholars. . . . Authenticity, particularly when validated as the production of an artistic individual (writer, painter, performer), is a criterion of distinction normally used to accumulate official cultural capital but which is readily appropriated by fans in their moonlighting cultural economy."[59]

The Specter of Authenticity

But even when academic discussions call into question notions of the authentic and autonomous versus the inauthentic and commercial, they underscore their continued relevance by focusing on them. As Aaron Fox writes in "White Trash Alchemies of the Abject Sublime: Country as 'Bad' Music," "The general consensus of recent scholarship—that the discourse of authenticity is an elaborate and cynical construction of value—has become a hackneyed point. And yet the logics of this construction, devolving around key oppositions . . . continue to compel the same scholars who would reject them."[60]

The same thing occurs in popular music criticism and commentary by journalists. Carl Wilson writes that "'authentic inauthenticity' is really just another way of saying 'art,' but people caught up in romantic ideals still bristle to admit how

[59] John Fiske, "The Cultural Economy of Fandom," in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media,* ed. Lisa A. Lewis (New York: Routledge, 1992), 36.
[60] Aaron Fox, "White Trash Alchemies of the Abject Sublime: Country as 'Bad' Music," in *Bad Music: The Music We Love to Hate,* ed. Christopher J. Washburne and Maiken Derko (New York: Routledge, 2004), 47.

much of creativity is being able to manipulate artifice."[61] He came across this Fornäs-esque phrase in the work of Grossberg, and he does not react favorably to it. Later in his book, in the process of exploring reactions to Céline Dion's work, he rails against the idea that sentimentality in pop music is a bad thing. [62] "I can absolve sentimentality of the superficial charges fast. Manipulative? Manipulating listeners, *moving* them, is what music is supposed to do, skillfully. Phony? All art is fake. What matters is to be a convincing fake, a lie that feels true. Clearly Céline has her audience convinced."[63]

Wilson's position here actually echoes a point made by Fornäs and Moore. Despite his reluctance to name authenticity as a value, his assertion of the importance of a "convincing" performance that makes sense to an artist's audience and "feels true" echoes both scholars' theorization of authenticity as a social value, which Fornäs calls "reception authenticity," a "form of identificatory discourse," one that is not inherent to a text but that emerges through an audience's meaningful engagement with it.[64]

This is not the only point in Wilson's study of Dion where he avoids the term "authenticity," seemingly in an effort to distance himself from outdated rockist values, yet draws upon traditional authenticity discourse to support a favorable

---

[61] Carl Wilson. *Céline Dion's Let's Talk About Love: A Journey to the End of Taste.* (New York: Continuum Publishing Group, 2007), 71.
[62] Ibid., 122–4.
[63] Ibid., 123.
[64] Fornäs, "Listen to Your Voice!," 168.

view of his subject. One of the most striking examples of this is Wilson's description of Dion's Québécois heritage, which he spends an entire chapter exploring.

"To most of the English world," he asserts, "Céline's Frenchness remains a vague thing, almost an affectation; that it represents a whole culture groping its way to self-determination doesn't translate . . . If she fails most non-fans' authenticity tests, the trouble may be not only her showbiz upbringing but that her personal touchstones are off the map."[65] As often happens when he grapples with a term like authenticity, which he seems deeply ambivalent about, Wilson does a bit of rhetorical gymnastics here, managing not to own up to valuing authenticity while at the same time arguing against those who would impugn Dion's lack of it.

Later he writes, "Céline Dion's music and career are more understandable if she is added to the long line of ethnic 'outsiders' who expressed emotions too outsized for most white American performers but in non-African American codes, letting white audiences loosen up without crossing the 'color line.'"[66] He also seizes on her famous comment, "Let them touch those things!" made on the Larry King Show in response to the looting that took place after Hurricane Katrina, often considered a gaffe on her part. Wilson not only finds Dion's sympathy toward underprivileged New Orleans residents poignant and relatable but uses it to bring up her own underprivileged background and to frame her music in relation to it.

---

[65] Wilson, *Let's Talk About Love,* 36.
[66] Ibid., 58.

"I've come to hear [the post-Katrina comment] as Céline's one-line manifesto," Wilson says. "The overgrown sonics of her music, what you might call *conspicuous production*, are there so that she, the poor girl from Charlemagne, can touch them. Like hip-hop, it's aspirational music."[67] Without being explicit about it, Wilson casts Dion as an ethnic Other and emphasizing the low socioeconomic status of her childhood, while implying that both shore up claims of legitimacy (and, explicitly or implicitly, of authenticity) for her music.

Moore describes a similar discursive dynamic in his discussion of blues appropriation, which I mentioned earlier. He writes that audiences perceived music by British artists like Eric Clapton as "telling the truth of (absent) others" in part because of "an unquestioned assumption that African Americans in the south USA were somehow more 'natural' beings than white, college-educated Londoners . . . such an appropriation is commonly considered normative."[68] Moore points out that Grossberg's "genre-specific" categories of authenticity, the springboard for Fornäs's formulation, includes "black genres (founded on the rhythmicised and sexual body)."[69] While Wilson is careful to point out the significance of Dion's whiteness, his emphasis on her potential Other-ness places him squarely in an established tradition of authenticity discourse normally associated with rockism.

I have shied away from referring to Wilson as a poptimist here. As far as I know, he has never embraced the title. But I have yet to encounter any journalist—

---

[67] Wilson, *Let's Talk About Love,* 69.
[68] Moore, "Authenticity as Authentication," 215.
[69] Ibid., 214.

or any fan for that matter—who self-identifies as a poptimist, except for those who use the term with enough irony to call the label into question. Poptimism is similar to rockism (indeed, this may be their greatest similarity) in that it is a term generally used to describe others and never fully owned as a description of oneself. Nevertheless, I believe that Wilson is, if not unequivocally a poptimist, as clearly emblematic of poptimism as any critic can be.

Another good candidate for the poptimist label is Frank Kogan. His status as the author of the famous "Paris is Our Vietnam" column would seem not only to guarantee his membership in the poptimist club but also make him a contender for some sort of leadership position. Yet Kogan has stated for the record that he might be a rockist. In a 2008 column decrying the untenability of both the concept of rockism and the rejection of authenticity as a concept, he writes:

> My problem is more personal: I can't tell if I'm a rockist or not, or whether a lot of other rock critics are rockists or not (Dave Marsh, Greil Marcus, Richard Meltzer, Lester Bangs, Robert Christgau, Chuck Eddy), and I think the confusion is in the concept, not in me. My problem with the antirockists was their tendency to externalize "rockism" as some foreign body that needed to be defeated—or, if internal, as something that needed to be outgrown—rather than as cultural processes that we participate in. And authenticity . . . [ellipsis in original] I may hate the noun form, but I find the adjectives—

"real," "actual," "authentic"—absolutely crucial, and the tensions they signal are as alive and burbling and googooing now as the day they were born.[70]

Kogan even offers a quote from his past from a 1985 piece in issue #20 of the legendary zine *Cometbus* called "The Autobiography of Bob Dylan" as "an authenticity argument if I've ever seen one": "Now so many musicians conform to the idea of truth that says that truth is raw, ugly, and primitive that this primitiveness is a cliché, it's a new brand of deodorant, punk-hardcore deodorant; ultimately, it's nothing. Punk isn't punk anymore, it's a bunch of musical/clothing signs that symbolize punk. It's closer to literature or advertising than to music."[71]

Although this quote is from a period when Kogan was much more focused on punk, a genre with a great deal of emphasis on authenticity and an aesthetic sensibility that at times can resemble a more purified version of 1960s rock chauvinism, Kogan was always a champion of certain commercial artists, and he has continued to draw upon authenticity discourse in his more pop-focused recent writings. He is speaking in the present tense when he writes that for him the words "real," "actual," and "authentic" are "absolutely crucial."[72] Although he looks from some angles like a poster child for poptimism (or antirockism, as Kogan would say—he scrupulously avoids the p-word), Kogan has a serious problem with the rejection of authenticity discourse associated with it. As he put it in a 2007 comment

---

[70] Frank Kogan. "Rules of the Game No.31: Rockism and Antirockism Rise From the Dead," http://www.lasvegasweekly.com/news/archive/2008/feb/20/the-rules-of-the-game-no-31-rockism-and-antirockis/ (accessed June 13, 2010).
[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid.

on his livejournal, “My antagonism towards antirockism is that it's what people did instead of trying to think their way through ideas like mine. I don't think anything about the drive towards authenticity or Significance has been well-discussed, much less laid to rest.”[73]

Kogan is not the only holdout, and not all critics are skirting the issue like Wilson by evoking authenticity without naming it. While working on this chapter, I actually found myself wondering whether authenticity were really a burning question in musical discussions these days, and my answer came almost immediately when two pieces about Lady Gaga came to my attention within a day of one another. First a friend sent me a link to a piece by Ann Powers called “When Rock Stars Fake It.” Then a new issue of the online journal *Flow* came out, including a piece by my friend and colleague Alexander Cho titled “Lady Gaga, Balls-Out: Recuperating Queer Performativity.”

Powers is not particularly associated with poptimism, though she has written, “I'm happy the tide has turned toward poptimism. Not only does it widen the field for us music-obsessed chin-scratchers, it has allowed for important new discussions about race, class and gender, those old staple subjects of music writing.”[74] She also wrote, in the same piece, that “poptimism has also taken the habitual tussling among music writers to a whole new level” and that “this

---

[73] Frank Kogan, “The reviews are cool but they burn out,” http://koganbot.livejournal.com/27681.html (accessed June 13, 2010).
[74] Ann Powers. “Bratty by Nature,” *Los Angeles Times,* July 27, 2008, http://articles.latimes.com/2008/jul/27/entertainment/ca-pop27.

atmosphere of openness is mostly fantastic, but characteristically, pop critics have found a way to turn it confrontational."[75] Powers's engagement with the trend toward poptimism—intrigued and excited by some aspects, critical of others—is much more common among critics whose work I have examined than positions such as Wilson's or Kogan's. Although it would be inaccurate to classify her as a poptimist, she nevertheless is informed by poptimist critiques of traditional music criticism.

Powers notes Lady Gaga's insistence that her musical persona is "'not a character'" and her refusal to answer to her given name, Stefani Germanotta, writing that she "is only the most insistent in a wave of pop artists actively questioning the value of an old and often-debated artistic standard: authenticity."[76] Powers sees something new in the way artists like Gaga use performance, claiming that in the past, "the balance between 'real' and 'fake' in pop has run in cycles. Rawness and spontaneity come into fashion, then formalism and glitz," but now, "the split between 'real' and 'fake' seems to have closed."[77] As Powers sees it, "this isn't because the quest for authenticity has been abandoned. It's because, for artists like Gaga, fake has become what feels most real."[78]

Powers also sees the prevalence of Auto-Tune as characteristic of "the gradual emergence of the computer as pop's main musical instrument," not only

---

[75] Ibid.
[76] Ann Powers. "When Rock Stars Fake It," *Los Angeles Times,* July 12, 2009, http://articles.latimes.com/2009/jul/12/entertainment/ca-poptheatricality12.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Ibid.

within genres previously dominated by synthesized sounds but across the board, given the pervasiveness of computer recording.[79] "Using Pro Tools or other digital audio workstations that provide huge libraries of sampled sounds," she writes, "songwriters can create whole soundscapes without strumming a guitar or hitting a drum."[80]

Powers provides quotes from David Bowie and Grace Jones, artists who prefigure Gaga's performance style, on the division between their stage personae and real selves, to distinguish them from performers like Lady Gaga, who "are the ones who've gone beyond fake. It's not that they no longer recognize the distinction between real life and performance; it's that they don't care about it. The pose initiates the self; what's behind it just can't be that interesting."[81]

"Originality is, in its own way, a sign of authenticity," Powers writes. "Only Bowie could be Ziggy Stardust, because the character, however elaborately garbed and alien-seeming, came from within."[82] But "Lady Gaga is more like a collection of quotes than a singular performer . . . a human mash-up, a sample bank, recycled and reused." Given that "the moves these young artists make rarely seem new," Powers wonders, "is this a lack of originality, or a refusal of it?"[83] She concludes, with what sounds to me like a note of sarcasm, that "in the permanent state of Gaga, 'new' is a

---

[79] Ibid.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Ibid.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Ibid.

false category, just like 'real.' . . . The evidence is before us now, that every artist is a borrower, every genius is a liar. Why pretend otherwise?"[84]

Cho's perspective on Lady Gaga has some notable similarities to Powers's. He emphasizes many of the same qualities Powers does: Gaga's refusal to answer to her birth name and the way her outlandish stage persona (and the associated costumes) extend into every appearance, press conference, and interview, giving an appearance of a seamlessly constructed false identity. He concurs that, "on the surface" at least, "her music and persona are entirely derivative" and adds that "she seems concerned mainly with acts of conspicuous consumption, and she adheres to a fascist body regime beholden to elitist, white, hyper-feminine beauty norms."[85] Although "it may be simple to dismiss her outright as a bit of normative pop fluff," he maintains that:

> In fact, Lady Gaga makes a very explicit attempt to shrewdly, purposefully—even politically—expose the nature of our fascination with pop icons by making it her mission to foreground the artifice of her own performance . . . [she] makes it her chief purpose to expose pop's artificiality; her performance is the performance of fakeness. In other words, because Lady Gaga is always performing. . . . Onstage and off, in interviews and in her lyrics,

[84] Ibid.
[85] Alexander Cho, "Lady Gaga, Balls-Out: Recuperating Queer Performativity," *FlowTV* 10, (2009), http://flowtv.org/?p=4169.

> Lady Gaga collapses the distinction between star image, character, and performance, thus emphasizing pop's own artifice.[86]

Cho further asserts that Gaga's "chief mechanism" for carrying out her performance is "her body and its particularly gendered politics" and that by extension she "interrogates the performative nature of gender, sex, and sexuality and their relationship to celebrity"; for that reason, "Lady Gaga's highlighted artifice of pop performativity itself becomes a queer act."[87]

For Cho, one of the crucial aspects of Lady Gaga's "performance of celebrity," what sets her apart from other pop stars who have done otherwise similar work, is that their performances are "entirely less reflexive."[88] In many respects, it is the assumption of a complex, intentional, and self-aware effort on the part of Lady Gaga and her accomplices that separates Cho's more favorable reading of Lady Gaga from Powers's, which is, at best, ambivalent and, at worst, anxious.

At the very least, these two responses to Lady Gaga, one a comparatively intellectual piece of rock criticism, the other a comparatively informal piece of academic writing, which share so many observations in common but come to such different conclusions, show that authenticity and its conceptual vagaries remain vital in contemporary discourse on popular music. They also illustrate Fornäs's claims about authenticity in that both writers' reactions to Lady Gaga seems in large part dependent on whether they believe in her potential for reflexivity. Although

---

[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Ibid.

Cho does not evoke authenticity by name, his description of Gaga's persona is similar to the notion of the "authentic inauthentic." Powers offers more questions than answers but wonders whether authenticity (and possibly originality, which she links with it) are endangered by the trend Gaga represents. When Powers argues that earlier performers like Bowie and Jones had a more developed boundary between their real selves and their personae, she is evoking reflexivity as well.

Fornäs speaks metaphorically about reflexivity as "hearing your own voice"; just as a person must exist as something more than a voice in order to hear themselves, a performer must have a self separate from their image in order to have the self-awareness to craft that image. Insofar as Powers does not see evidence of a separate self for Gaga, she cannot assume a reflexive, intentional performance. Insofar as Cho sees evidence of reflexivity, by implication there must be a self behind the mask.

Authenticity and Reflexivity of Reception

Much of my discussion so far has been focused on authenticity and reflexivity as they are perceived to inhere in musical artists or their creations. I say "perceived" because although the question may be whether a text or artist is authentic, as Fornäs and Moore both demonstrate, this question can only be answered subjectively by audience members. In other words, we can conceive of authenticity as a valid concept but not if we hope to find evidence of its objective existence out in the world; it is only by situating authenticity as a function of reception, one that is

takes shape between listeners' subjective position and their perception of an artist's, that the concept makes sense.

Although the listener is the ultimate arbiter of authenticity, it is still possible to recognize certain positions and strategies that tend to create the perception of authenticity in certain audiences, such as Moore's three categories. But what about the authenticity of the listener? Just as artists can be self-aware about their performance, bringing a sense of reflexivity into their work that complicates but ultimately (as Fornäs argues) shores up their authenticity, listeners and fans are equally capable of self-awareness, equally conscious in their production of an image for themselves, in part through their music choices.

Wilson makes a point of arguing this in his book on Dion. He quotes Bourdieu's statement that "tastes are first and foremost distastes, disgusts provoked by horror or visceral intolerance of the tastes of others," putting this idea in his own words by saying "not that people are only pretending to like or dislike the culture they like and dislike, trying to con people into thinking highly of them. . . . At worst I am conning myself, but to what I feel is my advantage."[89] At the same time, he points out recent studies that show that people react more favorably to music if they believe it is liked by others and asserts that "the bias that 'conformity' is a pejorative has led . . . to underestimating the part mimesis—imitation—plays in taste. It's

[89] Wilson, *Let's Talk About Love,* 90-91.

always other people following crowds, whereas my own taste reflects my specialness."[90]

Indeed, as I will discuss further, it is Wilson's suspicion of dislikes, of "distastes" and the "visceral intolerance" that he believes they represent, that motivates his development of the "guilty displeasure" concept and his Céline project. While I do believe that fans are capable of reflexivity and that their music choices are influenced by the sort of person they think likes a certain type of music and the sort of person they consider themselves (or would like to consider themselves), Wilson takes this notion to an extreme, fueling a cynical approach that in the end, leads potentially to eliminating value judgments entirely.

Tom Ewing, author of a series of columns called "Poptimist" (with a questionable degree of irony) on the popular internet music site Pitchfork, brings up similar points without the same degree of judgment. In "Poptimist #19: Fated to Pretend" he writes, "The most upsetting thing you can say to a critic isn't that their taste sucks, or even that they're unprofessional-- it's that they're being dishonest. 'Pretending to like' is the ultimate dismissal . . . So it's a non-starter as an argument, then? Not exactly: People do pretend to like things, all the time."[91] He goes on to describe a blatant example—a teenaged friend who boned up on Depeche Mode's

[90] Ibid., 79.
[91] Tom Ewing. "Poptimist #19: Fated to Pretend," http://pitchfork.com/features/poptimist/7549-poptimist-19/ (accessed June 13, 2010).

discography to try to impress a girl—but compares this conscious fakery with what he contends is a lesser degree of the same impulse at work in all taste decisions.[92]

Ewing refers to a recent marketing study on British teens in which they were asked "a question about what factors led them to try something new. 'Everyone else likes it' was one option among many. 'No one else likes it' was another. Older kids picked both in roughly equal proportions: I suspect they were showing more honesty and self-knowledge than most adults would."[93] While he acknowledges that it would be easy to use the "reductive binary" of "everyone likes it / no one likes it" to analyze people's musical tastes "like the models biologists use to understand the movement of birds in flocks. . . . This would be a world, incidentally, in which 'pretending to like' is a founding principle—in which all taste decisions are socially determined along crudely mechanistic lines."[94] Yet "there's a difference between a sparrow and a music fan," Ewing continues; sparrows may travel in flocks, but they are not fully aware of one another, whereas music fans have access to a great deal of information about the reception of musical texts (information like whether everybody or nobody likes them, and which everybodies and/or nobodies they are).[95] This self-awareness implies a capacity for reflexivity that, as with artists, both calls authenticity into question and potentially shores it up.

---

[92] Ibid.
[93] Ibid.
[94] Ibid.
[95] Ibid.

Ewing does not believe that reality is as "crudely mechanistic" as the model he describes. A contemporary fan usually approaches a band already knowing things like "where in the hype cycle they were and the kind of people who were enjoying them," and "surely in some cases" this affects their perception of them, "though let's give each other the benefit of the doubt and accept that such background information can shift a personal judgment up or down a notch or two, rather than determine it in the first place."[96]

Critics, according to Ewing, are supposed to function as "a figure who can step beyond the compromised mesh to . . . pronounce a more measured judgment," such that "to re-enter the network, to submit to its social pull on your opinions is to betray your critical integrity."[97] But this notion of the critic is under stress now, Ewing claims: "The critic's role was as a kind of ideal consumer, making an informed and expert judgment." Yet with the advent of electronic music distribution and the increase in social networking online, "the emphasis is increasingly on displaying and performing your taste—sharing tracks . . . creating playlists . . . the social elements are becoming hard-coded into the format of music," which may "leave the old-style critic . . . high and dry."[98] But critics can still be an indicator of a certain kind of "everybody," "one triangulation point among many so fans can better make their own, highly social, judgements about music" (I would argue that they have never

[96] Ibid.
[97] Ibid.
[98] Ibid.

been anything more.)[99] Disappointingly, Ewing closes his piece by circling back to his original statements on "pretending to like," saying that it "will remain the ultimate critical sin," without owning up to the clear implications of the rest of his article, which raises the implicit question of how honest anyone can be about liking things when we are all so heavily embedded in a social system that loads our value judgments of texts with baggage about identity and status.[100] It is a question that applies equally to fans and critics but becomes all the more fraught when asked of the latter, given that they are held to a higher standard of qualification while potentially having more incentives to pretend (particularly the conflicting pressures of maintaining a readership and staying on good terms with the music industry).

Taking another step back from this piece, what does it mean for a music critic like Ewing to explore questions such as these? From this angle, another layer of self-awareness comes into play, another chance for reflexivity to reflect either a suspect level of premeditation (for example, by asking questions about the relevance of music writers, is Ewing making a bid to remain relevant himself?) or a degree of reflexivity that supports a reading of Ewing as authentic (he shows openness by choosing a frank discussion about these ideas over keeping his questions to himself and putting up a self-assured front; this could lend added credence to all of his writing).

Fornäs makes a similar point to Ewing's in "Listen to Your Voice!":

---

[99] Ibid. Ewing's inconsistent spelling of "judgment" retained from original.
[100] Ibid.

> In the choice of genres to play in or listen to, people mirror and confirm their identities, through various perceived homologies between these identities and some musical, lyrical, and visual aspects of the music. This choice seems to have become more and more conscious and debated in late modernity, through a cultural release from naturalizing traditions and a growth in the stock of available stylistic tools.[101]

Another way of describing this increase in consciousness is to say that musical identity-building has become more reflexive. It makes sense that some of the most soul-searching examples of such reflection would originate from music journalists.

Wilson's Céline project is the most exhaustive such exercise I have witnessed. Wilson not only attempts to lay bare the reasons for his musical tastes, including unflattering, cultural capital-mongering motivations, he actually attempts to change them. He recalls his early dislike for genres like disco and country, which seemed so immediate and visceral (and hence uncalculated) at the time, so "clean" and "pure," but in retrospect seem motivated by the type of status-seeking behavior that Bourdieu describes.[102]

In keeping with this skepticism, Wilson views the process of musical identity-building with a rather jaundiced eye. "Musical subcultures exist," he writes, "because our guts tell us certain kinds of music are for certain kinds of people. The codes are

---

[101] Fornäs, "Listen to Your Voice!," 170.
[102] Wilson, *Let's Talk About Love,* 15-16.

not always transparent. . . . But it's hard not to notice how often those processes reflect and contribute to self-definition, how often persona and musical taste happen to jibe."[103] Although he describes phenomena that Fornäs, Moore, and others also report on without such negative connotations, he does so with a tone of aversion—the sarcasm with which he writes about tastes and identities "happen[ing] to jibe" is unmistakable.

Given his suspicion of musical "self-definition," it is no wonder that Wilson seeks to root out such impulses within himself through an intense exercise in reflexivity. Yet, in his interviews with Dion's fans, he seems moved by their innocence. [104] He emphasizes that one subject, a drag queen who performs as Céline, "is a female impersonator, not a queer-studies professor."[105] And he quotes his last interview subject, Stephanie Verge, "an arts-listing editor at a prominent Toronto magazine" who has both more hipster cred and more of an inclination to analyze her own tastes than the other interviewees in the book, at length on the subject of sincerity and cynicism:

> I think we live in a society where people's visceral responses or emotional responses aren't really respected. And I think they should be. . . . Even if it's not cool, even if it borders on the ridiculous in a lot of ways, and you can't imagine why people would ever cry to a Céline Dion song, I think we should probably have more of a respect for

[103] Ibid., 17.
[104] Ibid., 108–117.
[105] Ibid., 113.

> people's lack of guile . . . I think it's good to have things that you can't explain.[106]

Without explicitly agreeing with Verge, Wilson grants her interview special status, quoting her at much greater length than any of his other interviewees and placing her comments at the closing of his section on fan interviews. However, her comments run directly counter to the message of most of Wilson's book and, indeed, of the Céline project itself.

Wilson's contradictory attitude toward reflexivity is characteristic of poptimist discourse on the topic. The Céline project is an exercise in intense reflexivity, yet Wilson valorizes the guilelessness of Dion's fans. His attitude toward traditional notions of authenticity is equally mixed; he derides traditional notions of the concept, yet presses them into service in his effort to portray Dion favorably. Frank Kogan demonstrates a commendable awareness of the complexity of these issues, but his subtle perspective is rather exceptional. For the most part, poptimist discourse on the subject is either avoidant or oversimplified.

The interrelated terms of authenticity and reflexivity not only remain relevant in contemporary popular music discourse but underlie the recent debates over poptimism and rockism. As I have discussed, the significance of these ideas lies in the way they delineate the complex relationships among human beings, their constructed identities, and media texts. It is fitting, then, that my next chapter will deal with identity and difference.

---

[106] Ibid., Verge quoted, 117.

Chapter Three: Identity and Difference

In April 2006, the Experience Music Project (EMP) held the fifth annual Pop Conference in Seattle, Washington. For most of us who were not in attendance (and probably for many who were), the first sign that something controversial had occurred was a blog entry by music writer Jessica Hopper posted on April 28:

> EMP Report: I did not have to ask Stephin Merrit of Magnetic Flds whether he was racist, because his nice, long elucidating comment about his love, NAY, obsession with racist cartoon, Song of The South, served as a pre-emptive answer. It's one thing to have 'Zippitty Doo Da' be your favorite song. It is another to lay in for an Uncle Remus appreciation hour amidst a panel--('I love all of it,' he says). . . . sadly, we missed Merritt's entire theory about melisma (the vocal technique) and how it related to his idea's of CELINE DIONS BEING BLACK. Apparently, after a few minutes, someone kindly informed him that Celine Dion is actually white, and Canadian at that. Celine Dion is unblack as hell.[107]

Hopper posted an addendum the following day noting that "Mr. Merritt has offered to provide a complete transcript of the keynote panel for my review, as he feels my impression is not accurate" and that Hopper agreed to repost after reading it.[108]

---

[107] Jessica Hopper, "Celine Dion is Unblack as Hell," tinyluckygenius aka the Unicorn's tear, April 28, 2006, http://tiny.abstractdynamics.org/archives/007723.html (accessed 3/15/10). In this, as in all other quotes by Hopper, all misspellings, grammatical errors, and emphases are present in the original.

[108] Ibid.

If someone accesses this blog post now, they are directed to a couple of other posts that are intended to clarify the issue. One is mildly apologetic: "I have gotten the transcript of the Stephin Merritt panel I walked out on, and apparently missed Merritt qualifying his thoughts on Song of The South . . . I retract my earlier statements": the other (archly titled "I Called Stephin Merritt a Racist and All I Got Was This Lousy Blog Post") is more defensive, even combative: "Would you say that four posts in two years from me, and two from Sasha [Frere-Jones] really qualify as a vicious campaign against 'tender' Stephin Merritt? I mean, I know I'm a zealot and all, buuut really now . . ."[109]

Between Hopper's initial posting and her defensive reply to the controversy whose beginning it marked, a flurry of blog entries and online articles had sprung up on Merritt's EMP comments. But this was not the first time the idea of Merritt's musical taste reflecting racist attitudes had been floated. The aforementioned Frere-Jones, a music critic and columnist for *The New Yorker,* also spoke out against Merritt on his blog in May 2004. In a post called "Gerrymandering, on Ice," Frere-Jones reacted to a guest column in *The New York Times* for which Merritt was asked to provide a list of recommended songs with commentary, and all seven were white.[110] "Let's watch Stephen Merritt swing a scythe through the fields of popular

[109] Jessica Hopper, "A Note," and "I Called Stephin Merritt a Racist and All I Got Was This Lousy Blog Post," tinyluckygenius aka the Unicorn's tear, May 05, 2006 and May 9, 2006, http://tiny.abstractdynamics.org/archives/007743.html and http://tiny.abstractdynamics.org/archives/007762.html (both accessed March 15, 2010).
[110] Sasha Frere-Jones, "Gerrymandering, on Ice," S/FJ, May 16, 2004, http://sfj.abstractdynamics.org/archives/002900.html (accessed March 15, 2010).

music with a blindfold on," Frere-Jones writes. "Huh! Seven 'great' new pop records and not a person of color involved in a single one. That's one magical, coincidence-prone scythe you got there, Stephen." An imaginary respondent answers: "*It's just his taste, man. It doesn't mean anything. They had Usher in there a few weeks ago. Lighten up.*"[111] But Frere-Jones is not buying this argument (hardly surprising since it comes from his own internal straw man). He responds by referring to past comments from Merritt that he found objectionable:

> You could go back to the New York interview and note how eager Merritt is to dismiss Beyoncé, OutKast, Britney [Spears] and Justin [Timberlake], not just as singers and songwriters but as bearers of meaning. That's a bias. Two women, three people of color and one white artist openly in love with black American music. That's who he's biased against. You could say there's no pattern here and that taste indicates nothing more than individual psychology. You would then, hopefully, let me get a taste of whatever has made you so HIGH.[112]

Hopper's post was merely the most recent and most attention-grabbing dig against Merritt at the time that it ignited a passionate debate. Even so, this post, like so many of Frere-Jones's and others, may only have garnered attention from a few fellow music enthusiasts if musician and writer John Cook had not written a high-profile piece for the online magazine *Slate* called "Blacklisted: If you don't like rap,

---

[111] Ibid.
[112] Ibid.

are you a racist?' which detailed Hopper's and Frere-Jones's criticism of Merritt and the various interviews and reviews on which they based it. "I have never met Merritt, and I have no idea whether or not he hates black people," Cook writes. "But neither do Sasha Frere-Jones and Jessica Hopper." As he sees things,

> the whole of their sustained attack against Merritt is founded on the dangerous and stupid notion that one's taste in music can be interrogated for signs of racist intent the same way a university's admissions process can: If the number of black artists in your iPod falls too far below 12.5 percent of the total, then you are violating someone's civil rights. . . . The closest thing to a coherent argument that can be gleaned from what Frere-Jones and Hopper are saying is that a genuine respect for our common dignity and humanity requires that we enjoy listening to hip-hop, and that we bend our intuitive aesthetic judgments about music to a political will—like eating our vegetables and avoiding dessert.[113]

Cook agrees that Merritt's opinions seem to have a bias but sees this bias as one based on commercialism rather than race. "A reasonable person," he writes, "would understand . . . from these comments . . . that Merritt believes contemporary popular music, whether it's produced by white people (Timberlake and Spears), or black people (Beyoncé), to be more concerned with selling an image than recording and

[113] John Cook, "Blacklisted: Is Stephin Merrit a racist because he doesn't like hip-hop?" *Slate,* May 9, 2006, http://www.slate.com/id/2141421.

performing songs."[114] If Cook's interpretation is accurate, one could justifiably call Merritt a rockist. But by this standard, it is possible that the difference between being a rockist and a racist could be seen as nonexistent, or at least moot.

It is hard to justify this argument, which seems to be what Frere-Jones's and Hopper's critique boils down to (at least, as far as anyone can tell—there is a frustrating lack of specificity to their commentary). Cook's response is refreshingly explicit compared to what he calls the "innuendo and implication" used by Merritt's detractors, and his argument against their assumptions is sound. But it also forecloses some important questions raised by this controversy. If the answer to "if you don't like rap, are you a racist?" is "no," or at least is not a clear "yes," other questions still remain. In other words, once we set aside what ethnocentric music taste *does not* say about a person, the question remains: what *does* it say—not only about the person whose taste is being interrogated but the social and historical context that shapes their musical inclinations?

To answer such a question fully—even to attempt to do so—would take up volumes. But I believe that exploring the discourse surrounding questions of identity—not only racial identity but other dimensions such as class, gender, and sexuality—in contemporary popular musical discourse can help to clarify how these important ethical issues are manifesting themselves in popular culture today. It may also help to determine whether strategies intended to minimize racism (or other hegemonic cultural tendencies such as sexism and elitism) are effective or tenable.

---

[114] Ibid.

In this chapter I will discuss how the controversy surrounding Merritt's comments is characteristic of poptimist attitudes toward identity politics. I will explore the significance of a couple of trends in contemporary culture: an increase in omnivorous reception, a state of affairs in which groups with high cultural capital have become more likely to consume both highbrow and lowbrow media while spurning the middlebrow, and an ambivalent attitude toward hybrid forms of musical production that combine elements of genres associated with disparate social groups. Poptimist attitudes toward both phenomena are significant to my analysis. From there I will consider how highbrow reception differs from other forms not only in terms of the media texts chosen, but also in the approach taken toward chosen texts. I will demonstrate how poptimist critics tend to use highbrow strategies such as intellectualization even when engaging with lowbrow texts.

I will also delve into the notion of identity itself. Poptimist writing that deals with identity politics tends to oversimplify this complex concept, ignoring important issues such as intersectionality (the interaction of multiple vectors of oppression). From there, I will move on to other types of identity that come into play in poptimist discourse.

Before I continue, I am going to digress for a moment to note some differences between academic and journalistic writing that pertain to my discussion. The goals of the music critics I am examining, whether they embrace the "poptimist" label or not, are not always clearly stated. Academic writing has a reputation for being dense, filled with jargon, and otherwise inaccessible to the average reader, a

perception that has some degree of basis in reality. But one important advantage of academic writing conventions is that they encourage authors to state their investment in the topic, their goals, questions, and hypotheses and to apply rigorous standards to any conclusions they might draw. These strictures do not apply to music writers who work in the spheres of magazines, newspapers, web sites, and blogs.

This has advantages and disadvantages for the effective exploration of important ideas. On the one hand, the leeway journalists have to muse freely, refer to assumptions as fact without citing evidence, use anecdotal information as a starting point, quote academic sources out of context to support their views, and otherwise say what is on their minds about all things music-related allows them to write things that an academic could not and to discuss subjects that an academic would have to deal with in a much more careful, time-consuming way. By the time this thesis is finished, aspects of my discussion will be outdated simply by virtue of the speed of cultural discourse. The factors that limit the speed with which I can comment have a real impact on the relevancy of my work.

On the other hand, the checks and balances that slow down academic writing result in greater rigor and clarity. That I am required to show some kind of proof for my assertions, or at least to cite another writer who has made that assertion, makes it more difficult for me to distort reality in support of my point of view. Since I must demonstrate a thorough knowledge of any academic theory I quote, I am much less likely to misrepresent it. Moreover, I must be explicit about what I am trying to do

and why, which is also beneficial. The difficulty of stating with certainty who is or is not a poptimist is a prime example of the vagueness that journalistic freedom can propagate, but there are many other examples. Even Hopper and Frere-Jones, who are relatively direct in their criticism of Merritt, take advantage of their freedom to be oblique. Frere-Jones will only describe Merritt as "biased" while Hopper says she "did not have to ask . . . whether he was racist" because his "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" comment "served as a pre-emptive answer."[115]

"Something Unappetizing": Cultural "Borrowing"

After Cook's piece in *Slate,* Hopper was deluged with critical email messages. She responded in her "I Called Stephin Merritt a Racist" post by saying that "to reduce the argument specific to the varying things either [I or Frere-Jones] have written about around SM (see also in those posts: rockism, playlist meme, SM's unconcern for the last 50 years of black music) down to that I think dude's ish on race and music is questionable because he doesn't like Beyonce is to miss the point entirely."[116] Cook's description of both critics' arguments against Merritt was, indeed, a bit caricatured. Yet it is true that Hopper's and Frere-Jones's stated critique did boil down to taking issue with Merritt's disinterest in black music and occasional dismissal of high-profile black musicians.

---

[115] Hopper, "Celine Dion is Unblack as Hell," and Frere-Jones, "Gerrymandering, on Ice."
[116] Hopper, "I Called Stephin Merritt a Racist."

Carl Wilson, characteristically, viewed the situation in a more nuanced fashion, becoming one of the few high-profile music bloggers to discuss the controversy without taking a side. On his blog, Zoilus, Wilson brought up an angle on the story that was not raised elsewhere: how Merritt's personal history exemplifies the complexity of race issues when it comes to musical taste and expression. In a post called "Merritt Postscript: Zip-a-dee-doo-Dad," Wilson points out how the musical career of Merritt's biological father, Scott Fagan, may have affected his son's relationship to black music.[117] He describes Fagan as "a folksinger in the '60s folk revival" whose "earliest demos, in 1963, were full of Harry Belfafonte-ish numbers" and who "retreated home to the Virgin Islands, where he had grown up" in the early 1970s "and has stayed there doing music in a sort of Jimmy Buffet vein ever since."[118] According to Wilson's information, "Merritt grew up aware of Fagan while Fagan has only found out about Merritt fairly recently."[119] How might knowing Fagan was his father have affected Merritt?

> If you grew up aware that your father is this sorta white-rasta guy who sings in dialect, not to mention a self-styled musical genius who happened to leave you and your hippie mom to fend for yourselves, perhaps you would feel there's something unappetizing about white songwriters who piggyback on black culture, and become inclined to look mostly elsewhere for inspiration? .

---

[117] Carl Wilson, "Merritt Postscript: Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dad," Zoilus, http://www.zoilus.com/documents/in-depth/2006/000761.php (accessed March 17, 2010).
[118] Ibid.
[119] Ibid.

> . . If we are critical of mainstream America for ripping off black culture as its own (see "rock'n'roll"), why can a songwriter also get shit rained down on him for scrupulously avoiding that move? Rip off black culture, and you're a thief; don't, and you're a musical white supremacist. . . . the Scott Fagan factor might at least suggest what Merritt is trying not to do, and why his motivations may be far from the ones being imputed.

That one could also be criticized for liking black music too much or in the wrong way is very salient here (particularly since in addition to Merritt, Hopper, Frere-Jones, Cook, and Wilson are all white).

As Jason Middleton and Roger Beebe point out in "The Racial Politics of Hybridity and 'Neo-Eclecticism' in Contemporary Popular Music," a piece on the rap-rock fusion trend of the late 1990s/early 2000s, "musical 'borrowing' by white culture from black is nothing new in popular music."[120] From Elvis's popularization of songs by black artists to the Beastie Boys' suburban white boy take on hip-hop (not to mention earlier examples such as blackface minstrelsy), Middleton and Beebe point out many "well scrutinised" precedents for this phenomenon.[121] Simon Frith calls it "social and cultural 'theft'" and quotes Eric Lott on blackface: "The blackface performer . . . is in effect a perfect metaphor for one culture's ventriloqual

---

[120] Jason Middleton and Roger Beebe. "The Racial Politics of Hybridity and 'Neo-Eclecticism' in Contemporary Popular Music." *Popular Music*, 21, no. 2 (2002): 160.
[121] Ibid., 160.

self-expression through the art forms of someone else's."[122] Indeed, the notions that this phenomenon, whether it is called "borrowing" or "theft," occurs and that it is politically problematic are so widely acknowledged as to seem trite, too obvious to bear mentioning.

Middleton and Beebe frame their discussion of the rap/rock trend as a response to a perceived crisis in rock music after the "alternative" trend fizzled out in the mid-90s in which "a number of different strategies have been deployed (by the record industry) and employed (by these consumers) which attempt to develop new positions for these white suburbanites to occupy in the contemporary music cultural terrain in order to reassert their hegemony as both producers and consumers."[123] The most notable of these strategies, they assert, are "on the producer's side . . . to develop hybrid forms which combine rock with the styles of its music competitors—most notably, of hip-hop music and culture" and "on the consumer side . . . the emergence of a 'neo-eclectic' form of listening where a number of formerly disparate or even hostile musical forms are consumed by a single (white suburban) individual."[124]

That high-status groups who in the past might have expressed their status through an engagement with "highbrow" culture have become increasingly "omnivorous," broadening their musical tastes to include more "lowbrow" genres,

---

[122] Simon Frith. "Music and Identity," in *Questions of Cultural Identity,* ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996), 122.
[123] Ibid., 160.
[124] Ibid., 160.

has been thoroughly (and famously) demonstrated by Richard A. Peterson and Roger M. Kern in their 1996 article, "Changing Highbrow Taste: From Snob to Omnivore."[125] As Peterson and Kern put it,

> Dominant status groups have regularly defined popular culture in ways that fit their own interests and have worked to render harmless subordinate status-group cultures. . . . One recurrent strategy is to define popular culture as brutish and something to be suppressed or avoided . . . another is to gentrify elements of popular culture and incorporate them into the dominant status-group culture. Our data suggest a major shift from the former strategy to the latter strategy of status group politics.[126]

In addition to a number of other factors, including an increase in "cultural relativism" and the greater accessibility of elite cultural forms via the mass media, Peterson and Kern assert that "omnivorous inclusion seems better adapted to an increasingly global world managed by those who make their way, in part, by showing respect for the cultural expressions of others."[127] It is important to mention, though, that high-status individuals who become more omnivorous may widen the scope of their interests, but only within certain parameters; Peterson and Kern make a point of "differentiat[ing] between middlebrow and lowbrow because critical observers have suggested that when highbrows are open to non-highbrow

---

[125] Richard A. Peterson and Roger M. Kern. "Changing Highbrow Taste: From Snob to Omnivore," *American Sociological Review,* 61, no. 5, (Washington, D.C.: American Sociological Association, 1996), 900–907.
[126] Ibid., 906.
[127] Ibid., 905–6.

art forms, they seek out lowbrow forms created by socially marginal groups (Blacks, youth, isolated rural folks) while still holding commercial middlebrow forms in contempt."[128]

Bethany Bryson is even more specific in her article "'Anything But Heavy Metal': Symbolic Exclusion and Musical Dislikes."[129] After a detailed sociological study, Bryson finds that "highly educated people in the United States are more musically tolerant, but not indiscriminately so," adding that "class-based exclusion" is apparent "in that the genres most disliked by tolerant people are those appreciated by people with the lowest levels of education. Therefore, I suggest that *cultural tolerance should not be conceptualized as an indiscriminate tendency to be nonexclusive, but as a reordering of group boundaries that trades race for class*."[130] All in all, Bryson's results indicate that "cultural breadth has become a high-status signal that excluded low-status cultural cues," and thus suggests that "the phenomenon be understood as *multicultural capital*."[131]

Peterson and Kern pose omnivorousness in opposition to the alternative strategy of portraying lowbrow culture as "something to be suppressed or avoided," but Middleton and Beebe point out that "borrowing" from lowbrow forms—whether by copying or co-opting—is also a possibility, one that "allows for engagement with

---

[128] Ibid., 901.
[129] Bethany Bryson. "'Anything But Heavy Metal': Symbolic Exclusion and Musical Dislikes," *American Sociological Review,* 61, no. 5, (Washington, D.C.: American Sociological Association, 1996), 884-99.
[130] Ibid., 895, emphasis in original.
[131] Ibid., emphasis in original.

different (i.e. non-rock) musical forms while dissipating the cultural otherness of these forms for the white listening audience" and which "offers white suburbanites that perfect balance of familiarity and otherness." [132]

The strategy of the artists that Middleton and Beebe examine in their article (or, more accurately, the artists' record label representatives, marketers, and so forth) is that of emulating a genre pioneered by and associated with African-Americans but "marketing performers who look like the [white] buyers," in the process claiming a vital genre for "privileged subjects" in order to "reassert their hegemony."[133] The authors also discuss the "consumer side" of this phenomenon by examining specific examples of contemporary omnivorousness, which they term "neo-eclecticism."[134] They assert that "in certain highly visible manifestations, the neo-eclectic apparatus functions to compensate for the becoming-residual of the classic rock formation and its attendant normalisation of a white middle-class male subject position," and that "this compensation happens in such a way as to protect the dominant listening/viewing subject position and to displace or erase problems of racial difference."[135]

Frere-Jones points out the complexity of these issues in a piece for *The New Yorker* called "A Paler Shade of White: How Indie Rock Lost Its Soul" inspired by his experiences as a musician. "On and off since 1990 I've been a member of a funk band

---

[132] Middleton and Beebe, "The Racial Politics of Hybridity and 'Neo-Eclecticism' in Contemporary Popular Music," 161.
[133] Ibid., 160, 161.
[134] Ibid., 160, 169.
[135] Ibid., 168–9.

called Ui," he writes. "We've had six members, all white, though most of the musicians who inspire our sound are black . . . or are white bands heavily indebted to black music."[136] He describes how

> most of our music didn't require singing, but a few pieces needed the sound of a human voice to round them out. Yet singing stumped me. . . . And the problem was clearly related to race. It seemed silly to try to sound "black," but that is what happened, no matter how hard I tried not to. . . . Playing black music never felt odd, but singing it—a more intimate gesture—seemed insulting. By the time we recorded our last album, in 2003, I had given up singing altogether.[137]

Frere-Jones details his personal experience in order to put his observations about the pervasive whiteness of contemporary indie rock in perspective. He connects this quality with an enervating dullness in this popular genre. He sees most indie musicians as "retreating inward and settling for the lassitude and monotony that [they] seem to confuse with authenticity and significance," leaving critics like himself "waiting in vain for vigor, for rhythm, for a musical effect that could justify all the preciousness."[138]

He cites a few possible reasons for this state of affairs, but in the end Frere-Jones concludes that "the most important reason for the decline of musical

---

[136] Sasha Frere-Jones, "A Paler Shade of White," *The New Yorker,* October 22, 2007, http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/musical/2007/10/22/071022crmu_music_frerejones.
[137] Ibid.
[138] Ibid.

miscegenation . . . is social progress. Black musicians are now as visible and as influential as white ones. . . . The uneasy, and sometimes inappropriate, borrowings and imitations that set rock and roll in motion gave popular music a heat and an intensity that can't be duplicated today."[139] Basically, while acknowledging that "social progress" is positive, Frere-Jones is lamenting the fact that the decreasing acceptance of cultural "borrowing" that comes with it precludes a certain "intensity" that he associates with the mixing of cultures. As Wilson noted in a response piece for *Slate,* Frere-Jones's piece both "tends troublingly to reduce 'black music' to rhythm and sexuality," an essentializing move that has the potential to reinscribe racist stereotypes and "elide[s] the differences" between the influences of various genres from the African diaspora.[140]

In the process of discussing this issue, Frere-Jones touches on the question of neo-eclecticism. In arguing for the visibility of black artists, he asserts that "the Internet, by democratizing access to music . . . has also made individual genres less significant. Pop music is no longer made of just a few musical traditions; it's a profusion of strands, most of which don't intersect, except, perhaps, when listeners click 'shuffle' on their iPods."[141]

The phenomenon of co-optation through media reception may not be as well-known (to the point of cliché) as that of white performers copying black performers,

---

[139] Frere-Jones, "A Paler Shade of White."
[140] Carl Wilson, "The Trouble With Indie Rock," *Slate,* October 18, 2007, http://www.slate.com/id/2176187 (accessed April 8, 2010).
[141] Frere-Jones, "A Paler Shade of White."

genres, and tropes, but it is nothing new. The point that Wilson makes in his discussion of Merritt—that he might be subject to a different kind of criticism if his music was too indebted to African-American traditions, or the traditions of another oppressed group—could be extended to cover reception and evaluation as well. As Middleton and Beebe point out, neo-eclectic reception practices can function as a consumer strategy that parallels the producer strategy of "borrowing."

Wilson seems to regard the notion that such "borrowing" is problematic as a truism, and he correspondingly frames his discussion of Merritt in these terms, while emphasizing Merritt's role as a musician over his role as a fan, occasional critic, and potential tastemaker. But an equally critical view could be taken of neo-eclecticism. If both borrowing and omnivorousness can function to "reassert hegemony," as Middleton and Beebe convincingly argue, then white critics who endorse music by people of color (and male critics who endorse music by women, straight critics who endorse music by queer artists, etc.) stand in danger of losing their moral high ground. When privileged critics make claims on the work of a less privileged artist, they could arguably be aiding hegemony, not combating it. This is particularly true when critics like Wilson take music that appeals to a less privileged audience (he takes great pains to prove Céline Dion's fans fit into this category) and create intellectual narratives around it as he does in *Let's Talk About Love*.

Highbrow Strategies: Intellectualization and Eschewing the Middlebrow

I am reminded here of an entry music critic Alec Hanley Bemis contributed to the Coolfer blog, "One View on the Chuck Eddy/Village Voice Situation," on the highly publicized firing of critic and music editor Chuck Eddy from the *Village Voice* weekly.[142] Bemis writes that although the news is "a bummer on a personal level," it is "hard not to acknowledge Chuck's departure from the Voice doesn't come out of left field."[143] Bemis argues that Eddy "edited the section for himself and people like him. Rock critics, geeks. An audience that gave a shit that he was a contrarian, or even understood the dominant stream of thought & taste he was revolting against."[144] (It seems clear to me that the "dominant stream" Bemis is describing is that of rockism and that Eddy's "contrarian" position was a poptimist one.) "The problem," Bemis goes on to say, is that "a paper like the Voice needs to be read and understood by regular people. That's how newspapers survive, folks."[145] He goes on to tell an instructive anecdote from a period when he taught a graduate course at New York University called "Topics in Cultural Journalism: Youth Culture."[146]

> About 1/4 of the students were aspiring music/culture writers. The other 3/4 couldn't give a shit about any musician not in the top 40. I had them read some Voice stuff and could tell from their reactions that the section was in trouble. The aspiring music/culture writers hated it because it covered Toby

---

[142] Alec Hanley Bemis, "Guest Blogger: One View on the Chuck Eddy/Village Voice Situation," Coolfer, April 25, 2006, http://www.coolfer.com/blog/archives/2006/04/guest_blogger_o_1.php (accessed March 25, 2010).
[143] Ibid.
[144] Ibid.
[145] Ibid.
[146] Ibid.

> Keith and random boogie rock, while ignoring or underplaying lots of cult music faves. The other 3/4 of the class were mainstream "non-music" people. Normally they might be interested in a story about artists who shifted units (a mainstream country or rap musician, John Meyer [*sic*]). Unfortunately, the section was equally inaccessible to them because of its dense thickets of self-referential prose.[147]

Basically, the problem as Bemis describes it boils down to a radical disparity between, on the one hand, the tone of Eddy's writing, its baroque complexity and intellectual references, and, on the other, the genres and artists that he covered, which are associated with lowbrow fan bases of various stripes. The average fan of this music would not find Eddy's writing style appealing, and the kind of reader who would appreciate his style is more likely to want to read about genres that are higher in cultural capital (like "cult faves").

Wilson does something similar in his study of Céline Dion. In his chapter about Dion's fans, he emphasizes their subaltern qualities and lack of cultural capital—one fan is an immigrant from Cambodia, another a high-school dropout, another a drag queen.[148] About the latter, he pointedly writes, "Alex is a female impersonator, not a queer studies professor."[149] Yet Wilson's book on Dion seems

---

[147] Ibid.
[148] Carl Wilson. *Céline Dion's Let's Talk About Love: A Journey to the End of Taste.* (New York: Continuum Publishing Group, 2007), 108-114.
[149] Ibid., 113.

unlikely to appeal to such people—it is littered with references to Kant and Bourdieu and is published by a boutique press geared toward music geeks.

This is not as uncommon as one might think; taking lowbrow genres and appreciating them in highly intellectualized ways is highly characteristic of contemporary omnivorousness. As Peterson and Kern point out, "several studies have shown that criteria of distinction, of which omnivorousness is one expression, must center not on *what* one consumes but on the *way* items of consumption are understood. Bourdieu . . . for example, contrasts unreflective consumption for personal enjoyment with intellectualized interpretation." [150] They contend that while Bourdieu originally made this observation about "a monolithic cultural landscape appropriate to the era of the elitist snob," it is "also amenable to a *discriminating* omnivorousness if the ethnocentrism central to snobbish elitism is replaced by cultural relativism."[151]

Simon Frith finds even earlier antecedents for this phenomenon in a piece titled "Music and Identity." He argues that "the high/low distinction doesn't really concern the nature of the art object, or how it is produced, but refers to different modes of *perception*." [152] He traces this viewpoint "back to the eighteenth-century debates about musical meaning, and to the origins of the Romantic view of art that underpins high cultural arguments (. . . which was duly appropriated by . . . rock

[150] Peterson and Kern. "Changing Highbrow Taste," 904.
[151] Ibid.
[152] Frith, "Music and Identity," 114.

musicians)."[153] In a description that closely resembles Peterson and Kern's, he writes that "the crucial high/low distinction is that between . . . intellectual and sensual appreciation . . . To add low cultural goods to lists of 'art' objects available for intellectual . . . appreciation . . . is not, then, to get rid of the traditional boundaries between the high and the low."[154]

Wilson himself makes a similar point in his discussion of Bourdieu, noting that

> his original survey did not reflect the relatively recent shakeup in taste categories, the seeming collapse of high and low culture into a No-Brow society in which an in-depth knowledge of Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Japanese ganguro fashions and the latest graffiti artists may carry more cachet than a conversance with Molière, Schoenberg and Donald Judd. . . . For Bourdieu, it doesn't matter what the objects of good taste are at any moment. Change the value of x and the equations stays the same.

In other words, while omnivorousness may seem at first glance to undermine the competition for cultural capital, it merely changes the terms of the struggle.

I differ with Wilson on a couple of points, though. First: it is not merely a matter of replacing the "x" factor in an equation, substituting one media, genre, artist, etc. for another. As the scholars I have discussed have shown, the shift in media consumption strategies that created neo-eclecticism are a great deal more

[153] Ibid.
[154] Ibid.

complex than simply placing new media objects in the canon. And second, if Peterson and Kern's data is to be believed, it is not so much that the cultural landscape has become "No-Brow," making highbrow and lowbrow categories meaningless; rather, consumers who might have had highbrow taste in the past now display a specific type of omnivorousness which includes highbrow and lowbrow forms while, as Peterson and Kern put it, "holding commercial middlebrow forms in contempt."[155]

In my reading of work by poptimist critics, this is also the type of omnivorousness they tend to practice. For example, in best-of-the-year lists for the last few years on his blog, Frere-Jones includes artists from highbrow genres like indie rock, indie pop, and experimental music, including Dirty Projectors, Skullflower, Vampire Weekend, Beach House, No Age, and even, surprisingly, Merritt's band the Magnetic Fields. He also includes many commercial pop acts and other artists from lowbrow genres associated with what Peterson and Kern might call "socially marginal groups": hip-hop artists like Big Boi, Busta Rhymes, and Lil' Wayne (associated with African-American audiences) and artists associated with the working class, such as the metal band Mastodon and two American Idol alumni, Kelly Clarkson and Jordin Sparks.[156] But there is little, if anything, that falls in

[155] Peterson and Kern, "Changing Highbrow Taste," 901.
[156] Sasha Frere-Jones, "Best of 2007, " "Best of 2008," "Best of 2009," and "Best of 2010," S/FJ, December 19, 2006, December 29, 2007, December 07, 2008, November 20, 2009, http://www.sashafrerejones.com/2006/12/best_of_2007.html, http://www.sashafrerejones.com/2007/12/bumping.html, http://www.sashafrerejones.com/2008/12/best_of_2009.html, and

between—in that no-man's-land, so difficult to pin down, that we call middlebrow. And it's notable that the former category is mostly white and majority male while the latter is where you'll find most of the women and people of color.

In a February 2009 blog entry for the *Guardian,* critic (and frequent target of poptimist ire) Simon Reynolds identifies a shift in middlebrow music culture through an exploration of reactions to Animal Collective's immensely popular album *Merriweather Post Pavilion.* He argues that "what's really at issue" in debates about the album is "the status and function in our culture of 'middlebrow.' With *Merriweather,* almost everyone is either castigating or applauding Animal Collective for their tentative steps into the middling regions of pop culture: that Kid A zone" (here he references Radiohead's influential 2000 album) "where mild experimentalism meets not-too-obvious melodicism."[157] Reynolds points out that "there's little cultural capital to be had from sticking up for middlebrow. . . . There's two obvious and immediately satisfying ways of responding to [its] existence. . . . One is the elitist path. . . . the other angle, equally rewarding, is the populist stance."[158] In other words, cultural capital can be gained from affiliating oneself with highly popular music or with obscure genres, but not with the music that falls in between. Reynolds champions the idea of "a strong middlebrow culture" that would

---

http://www.sashafrerejones.com/2009/11/best_of_2010_1.html (all accessed April 6, 2010).

[157] Simon Reynolds, "Stuck in the middle with you: between pop and pretension," Guardian Music Blog, February 6, 2009, http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/musicblog/2009/feb/06/simon-reynolds-animal-collective (accessed April 8, 2010).

[158] Ibid.

include records like *Merriweather Post Pavilion*; the alternative—"abandoning middlebrow to the Coldplays and Elbows of this world"—Reynolds views as "cowardly." Reynolds is addressing music fans generally, but I think his message is also aimed at fellow critics because he realizes that they have a substantial anti-middlebrow bias.

Peterson and Kern's discussion centers around fans, not critics, but the politics of neo-eclecticism are the same in either case—except that the influence critics wield give the political implications of their tastes added importance. Given the critique of omnivorousness I have outlined, one could argue that white critics who champion music by African-American artists, or any critic who advocates for lowbrow music or music by individuals less privileged than themselves, is participating in a process of appropriation that is ultimately politically regressive. At the very least, the omnivorous strategies are clearly no guarantee of progressiveness. While their potential populism is readily apparent, it is undercut by the dynamics of highbrow reception, with its tendency to appropriate lowbrow genres and texts in potentially problematic ways.

Critics who advocate omnivorousness are, in some respects, reminiscent of the white hipsters examined by Ingrid Monson in her article "The Problem With White Hipness: Race, Gender, and Cultural Conceptions in Jazz Historical Discourse." In this piece, Monson outlines "the function of African Americans as a symbol of social conscience, sexual freedom, and resistance to the dominant order in the imagination of liberal white Americans," asserting that

> to the extent that well-meaning white Americans have confused the most "transgressive" aspects of African American culture with its true character, they fall into the trap of viewing blackness as absence. Whether conceived as an absence of morality or of bourgeois pretensions, this view of blackness, paradoxically, buys into the historical legacy of primitivism and its concomitant exoticism of the "Other."[159]

She goes on to paraphrase James Baldwin, writing that "admiration and the reinforcement of stereotype . . . are often not far apart."[160] In a sense, the mid-twentieth-century hipsters Munson discusses were vanguards of present-day omnivorousness and the decreased ethnocentrism that underpins it, with parallels to poptimist critics, who could also be described as "liberal" and "well-meaning" and who, if Peterson and Kern's assertions about neo-eclecticism hold true, also create paradoxical effects when they embrace black culture and its perceived transgressiveness.

But taking this argument to this potential conclusion is just as absurd as the conclusion Cook tackles in his *Slate* piece. Versions of both points of view hold merit. It makes sense that ethnocentric musical taste (or any privileging of work by privileged classes) should be queried for signs of racism (or other hegemonic biases). However, the argument that advocating for a more diverse groups of artists

---

[159] Ingrid Monson, "The Problem with White Hipness: Race, Gender, and Cultural Conceptions in Jazz Historical Discourse" in "Music Anthropologies and Music Histories," special issue, *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 48, no. 3, (1995): 398.
[160] Ibid., 402.

is not automatically, unequivocally subversive, but could actually contribute to hegemonic co-optation, is also quite sound. Yet both of these positions can be taken too far when they are considered separately.

The solution, I think, is to hold them both in tension. Tolerating elitism clearly is not going to lead to progress, but mandatory diversity (under pain of censure like that suffered by Merritt)—even optional diversity—is not always and necessarily progressive either. Keeping in mind that these strategies cut both ways is the only way to view these issues in a realistically nuanced way.

What is Identity, Anyway?

The politics of identity in music criticism are complicated enough given the terms I have been using so far. But identity—whether it is racial or ethnic identity or any of the multitude of dimensions of identity as it is popularly conceived in contemporary culture—is not as simple as it seems on the surface. Noted music scholar Frith believes that music itself has a way of destabilizing categories. "Anti-essentialism is a necessary part of musical experience," he claims, "a necessary consequence of music's failure to register the separations of body and mind on

which such 'essential' differences (between black and white, female and male, gay and straight, nation and nation) depend."[161]

Whether or not one finds this argument convincing, there remain a multitude of problems with the oversimplified, superficial view of identity promulgated in most contemporary discourse. A more critical approach originated with the work of Antonio Gramsci, whose writings have been fruitfully expanded upon by scholars like Stuart Hall. Hall quotes Gramsci as saying, "the personality is strangely composite" and goes on to explain that his "thinking on this question encompasses novel and radical ways of conceptualizing the subjects of ideology."[162]

> He recognizes the "plurality" of selves or identities of which the so-called "subject" of thought and ideas is composed. He argues that this multi-faceted nature of consciousness is not an individual but a collective phenomenon, a consequence of the relationship between "the self" and the ideological discourses which compose the cultural terrain of society.[163]

Included in this view, Hall writes, is that Gramsci "refuses any idea of a pre-given unified ideological subject—for example, the proletarian with its 'correct' revolutionary thoughts or blacks with their already guaranteed current anti-racist consciousness."[164]

---

[161] Frith, "Music and Identity," 122.
[162] Stuart Hall. "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity," in *Stuart Hall: Critical dialogues in cultural studies,* ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen, (London: Routledge, 1996), 433.
[163] Ibid.
[164] Ibid.

Hall discusses a specific example involving race in his article "New Ethnicities."[165] He writes about "a significant shift that has been going on (and is still going on) in black cultural politics" in the United Kingdom at the time the piece was written in 1996, one that had "two discernable phases."[166] First came "the moment when the term 'black' was coined as a way of referencing the common experience of racism and marginalization in Britain" and a "critique" was developed which had as "its two principal objects . . . first the question of access to the rights of representation by black artists and black cultural workers themselves. . . . second, the contestation of the marginality, the stereotypical quality and the fetishized nature of images of blacks, by the counter-position of a 'positive' black imagery."[167] Following that period, Hall writes, "I have a distinct sense that . . . we are entering a new phase" in which, "as the struggle moves forward and assumes new forms, it does to some degree *displace*, reorganize and reposition the different cultural strategies in relation to one another"; specifically, it is "best thought of in terms of a change from a struggle over the relations of representation to a politics of representation itself."[168] The advent of this phase

> marks what I can only call 'the end of innocence', or the end of the innocent notion of the essential black subject. . . . What is at issue here is the recognition of the extraordinary diversity of subjective positions, social

---

[165] Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities," in *Stuart Hall: Critical dialogues in cultural studies,* ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen, (London: Routledge, 1996), 441–9.
[166] Ibid., 441.
[167] Ibid., 442.
[168] Ibid.

> experiences and cultural identities which compose the category 'black'; that is, the recognition that 'black' is essentially a politically and culturally constructed category. . . . What this brings into play is the recognition of the immense diversity and differentiation of the historical and cultural experience of black subjects. The inevitably entails a weakening or fading of the notion that 'race' or some composite notion of race around the term black will either guarantee the effectivity of any cultural practice or determine in any final sense its aesthetic value.[169]

In light of this "end of innocence," one "can no longer conduct black politics through the strategy of a simple set of reversals, putting in the place of the bad old essential white subject, the new essentially good black subject."[170]

This leaves a void where this more simplistic approach used to be. Although it is difficult, Hall writes, "to conceive of how a politics can be constructed which works with and through difference, which is able to build those forms of solidarity and identification which make common struggle and resistance possible but without suppressing the real heterogeneity of interests and identities," nevertheless, this "does not absolve us of the task of developing such a politics."[171]

In a piece called "Who Needs Identity?" Hall develops his approach to identity in more detail. He distinguishes the "deconstruction" of "the notion of an integral, originary and unified identity" as a specific type of critique which "unlike

---

[169] Ibid., 443.
[170] Ibid., 444.
[171] Ibid.

those forms of critique which aim to supplant inadequate concepts with 'truer' ones" instead "puts key concepts 'under erasure,'" which means that while "they are no longer serviceable—'good to think with'—in their . . . unreconstructed form," at the same time "they have not been superseded dialectically, and there are no other, entirely different concepts with which to replace them" so that "there is nothing to do but to continue to think with them—albeit now in their detotalized or deconstructed forms."[172] The old ideas live on in the form of a kind of stopgap approximation, the closest thing to a legitimate idea that we can currently access.

But even before old ideas about identity became politically and theoretically suspect, Hall asserts that they were more tenuous than generally supposed. "Identification is in the end conditional," he writes, "lodged in contingency. Once secured, it does not obliterate difference. The total merging it suggests is, in fact, a fantasy of incorporation. . . . Identification is, then, a process of articulation, a suturing, an over-determination not a subsumption. There is always 'too much' or 'too little'—an over-determination or a lack, but never a proper fit, a totality."[173]

Hall's conception of identity "accepts that identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions. They are subject to a radical historicization, and

---

[172] Stuart Hall, "Introduction: who needs 'identity'?" in *Questions of Cultural Identity,* ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996), 1.
[173] Ibid., 3.

are constantly in the process of change and transformation."[174] This is closely related to his assertion, in the "New Ethnicities" essay, that "the end of the essential black subject also entails a recognition that the central issues of race always appear historically in articulation, in a formation, with other categories and divisions" and thus that "the question of the black subject cannot be represented without reference to the dimensions of class, gender, sexuality and ethnicity."[175] Without naming it in so many words, in this statement Hall provides a definition of intersectionality, the idea that different forms of oppression cannot be understood in isolation but must be viewed in context with one another.

Perhaps most importantly, Hall argues that "contrary to the form in which they are constantly invoked, identities are constructed through, not outside, difference"; thus, "it is only through the relation to the Other . . . to what has been called its constitutive outside that the 'positive' meaning of any term—and thus its 'identity'—can be constructed."[176] According to this scheme, identities only "function . . . because of their capacity to exclude, to leave out, to render 'outside,' abjected."[177] This argument may sound familiar given my earlier discussion of Wilson's Bourdieu-esque analysis of Dion's reception and Ewing's musings about marketing data. Similar dynamics are at work in the ways that, according to both

[174] Ibid., 4.
[175] Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities," 444.
[176] Stuart Hall, "Introduction: who needs 'identity'?", 4–5.
[177] Ibid., 5.

writers, people use musical taste to differentiate themselves through their musical taste.

Frith has yet another perspective on the relationship between musical taste and identity. Frith writes that he wants "to reverse the usual academic and critical argument: the issue is not how a particular piece of music or a performance reflects the people, but how it produces them, how it creates and constructs an experience . . . that we can only make sense of by *taking on* both a subjective and a collective identity."[178] Frith sees music as an experience that "means experiencing *ourselves* (not just the world) in a different way," identity as "*mobile*, a process not a thing, a becoming not a being," and music as "best understood as an experience of this *self-in-process*," particular given music's unique ability to evoke "a sense of both self and others, of the subjective in the collective."[179] (If this sounds reminiscent of Frank Kogan's comment, quoted in my second chapter, that rockism is not "some foreign body" to be rooted out but a set of "cultural processes that we participate in," it's probably no coincidence—Kogan and Frith are friends who, despite major differences in some areas, quote one another frequently.)

I would argue that the antiracist political strivings of poptimist music critics are more in line with the first phase Hall discusses in his piece which emphasized empowering black "cultural workers" and advocating for "positive" portrayals of blacks but was based on a relatively naïve concept of identity which posits a

[178] Simon Frith, "Music and Identity," 109.
[179] Ibid., 109–10.

mythical black subject that is "essentially good" and progress through a "simple set of reversals."

"We think about identification usually as a simple process, structured around fixed 'selves' which we either are or are not," Hall goes on to write. Yet not only is the subject discursively produced, as Gramsci pointed out but Hall describes how in the case of race, a complex interplay of "identification and desire" is present.[180]

> The play of identity and difference which constructs racism is powered not only by the positioning of blacks as the inferior species but also, and at the same time, by an inexpressible envy and desire; and this is something the recognition of which fundamentally *displaces* many of our hitherto stable political categories, since it implies a process of identification and otherness which is more complex than we had hitherto imagined.[181]

Hall is quick to point out that these dynamics are made even more complex because of the ways in which they intersect with other components of identity such as gender and class.[182]

Up to this point I have mainly focused on the racial component of identity to the exclusion of other aspects. This is in large part because, as in the case of the Merritt controversy, race issues tend to dominate poptimist discussions of identity issues. One critic who touches on other aspects of identity with some frequency is Wilson. In his response to Frere-Jones's "Paler Shade of White," Wilson notes this

---

[180] Ibid.
[181] Ibid., 445.
[182] Ibid.

racial emphasis and counters it with an argument that, as the subtitle of his piece "The Trouble With Indie Rock" states, "It's not just race. It's class." As I mentioned earlier, Wilson charges Frere-Jones with the classic essentializing move of "reduc[ing] black music to rhythm and sexuality."[183] It is possible to see how such a move not only reinscribes racist ideas about African-Americans but also plays into the interplay of identification and desire mentioned by Hall.

Wilson reframes the discussion in terms of not only race but class, writing that "ultimately . . . the 'trouble with indie rock' may have far more to do with another post-Reagan social shift, one with even less upside than the black-white story, and that's the widening gap between rich and poor."[184] He asserts that "among at least a subset of (the younger) musicians and fans, this class separation has made indie more openly snobbish and narrow-minded" and that indie rock has an "elite status and media sway . . . disproportionate to its popularity" which is "one reason the cultural politics of indie musicians and fans require discussion in the first place."[185]

Wilson also uses Dion's class status (she comes from a working-class Canadian family) to make a case for her work in *Let's Talk About Love.* He refers to her as "the poor girl from Charlemagne" and links origin with ethnicity when he posits a "link between the *nègres blancs* of Quebec and the Creole Blacks of New

[183] Wilson, "The Trouble with Indie Rock."
[184] Ibid.
[185] Ibid.

Orleans."[186] Wilson's willingness to explore other factors besides race in his discussions of the politics of music hints at an understanding of the complex nature of intersectionality referred to by Hall.

But he forecloses this potential complexity by simply replacing the race discussion with one that privileges class, missing an opportunity for a truly intersectional analysis, then going on to rely on other oversimplified, outdated ideas in his defense of Dion. By implicitly treating her lower-class origins and the relatively underprivileged status of her ethnic background as proof positive that Dion is a worthwhile performer, Wilson performs another version of the "simple set of reversals" Hall describes in which a subject is presented as "essentially good" by virtue of their race, class status, or some other subaltern characteristic. I am also reminded here of Hall's discussion of Gramsci and his critique, in the tradition of Gramsci, of the notion that working-class people have "'correct' revolutionary thoughts" or that blacks have an "already guaranteed current anti-racist consciousness."

This is not as damning an assessment as it may sound. Hall is widely acknowledged to be a shrewd observer of the politics of hegemony and was probably well ahead of the curve when it came to acknowledging the complexity of identity. But even Hall, while pointing out that previous ways of looking at these issues had become outmoded, did not pose a clear and easy-to-recognize alternative.

---

[186] Wilson, *Let's Talk About Love*, 69, 37–8.

There are other types of identity and other forms of difference than those that interpellate us into more or less privileged classes of people through categories such as race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, whether or not we are disabled, whether we are cisgender[187] or trans, and so on. Within the intersection of such identities where each of us finds ourselves, we can either distinguish ourselves from others (both those who share our intersectional position and those who do not) or join with them in sharing characteristics, practices and viewpoints.

Although it is an incredibly rich area of analysis, the significance of identity and difference for music reception extends beyond the identity politics into a multitude of other dimensions through which we conceptualize the self. After all, even among the straight, white, cisgender, non-disabled men that make up the majority of music critics, aesthetic and ideological turf wars are commonplace. These critics, as well as the fans who identify with them, often define themselves in contrast to one another despite the characteristics they share.

In one of the more notorious bits of poptimist criticism to appear in recent years, a 2007 blog entry called "Paris is Our Vietnam," Frank Kogan explains how he

---

[187] T-Vox, a website on transsexual, intersex, and genderqueer issues, defines cisgender as "'not [t]ransgender,' that is, a gender identity or performance in a gender role that society considers to match or be appropriate for one's sex." Naming cisgender specifically rather than simply saying "non-transgender" helps to prevent trans people from being labeled as exceptional, abnormal, or deviant. Using a specific term for the condition of being cisgender denaturalizes it and provides greater opportunities for examining and combating cisgender privilege. It also avoids inaccuracies that come up when people are referred to as "naturally" or "genetically" male or female or as having been "born" male or female. "Cisgender," T-Vox, http://www.t-vox.org/index.php?title=Cisgender (accessed August 10, 2010).

distinguishes himself from other listeners neither through old codes of cultural capital nor the new "multicultural capital" but by opposing himself to elitism. Kogan was widely criticized for the headline of this piece, which seemed to compare the significance of the debate over Paris Hilton to the Vietnam War. This struck some as especially problematic at a time when the United States was embroiled in another controversial overseas quagmire. But further inspection shows that Kogan's Vietnam reference has a specific significance for him. He describes how his understanding of the Vietnam War shifted from supporting the war in 1966 at age 12, "believing that we were defending freedom against communist aggression" to opposing the war two years later at 14.[188]

> The reasons for the switch were complicated. . . . But there was an early incident in 1966 that helped make me amenable to being turned: I heard a radio report about an antiwar demonstration where the peaceful demonstrators were attacked by a stone-throwing mob. . . . this incident with the Vietnam protesters created a rip in my understanding of the world. I thought we were the good guys in Vietnam (defending the South Vietnamese against communist aggression), and it didn't compute that the bad guys at home seemed to be on the good side and that the peaceful demonstrators

[188] Frank Kogan, "Rules Of The Game Followup #2: Paris Is Our Vietnam," Las Vegas Weekly News Blog, June 29, 2007, http://www.lasvegasweekly.com/news/archive/2007/jun/11/rules-of-the-game-followup-2-paris-is-our-vietnam (accessed May 26, 2010).

> seemed to be on the bad. My feeling was that I didn't want to be on the side of the stone-throwers. So I had to realign my thinking . . .[189]

Kogan explains that although there were a number of reasons for the change in his position, this experience was a powerful part of the process, and he finds himself reacting in a similar way to the flood of negative sentiment that accompanied Hilton's 2007 arrest for probation violation.[190] "I totally want to be on Paris's side," Kogan writes, "and this isn't so much because I know all that much about Paris (despite loving her album) but because I can't stand the people who vociferously dislike her. . . . The point here is that the haters stimulate me to want to like Paris's music. I want to like her because I don't like her enemies."[191]

Kogan is careful to point out that hearing about pro-war demonstrators hurting Vietnam War protesters was just a component of his changing perspective on the war and just as careful to mention that he liked Hilton's album before the intensity of popular criticism spurred him to a greater identification with her. He also points out that "of course, over the years the antiwar people themselves heaved plenty of rocks, literal and verbal, and so did I (and I've liked plenty of musical stone throwers, from the Stones through the Stooges and Sex Pistols and Contortions), so things never quite righted themselves into good guys versus bad guys" after his youthful idealization of U.S. foreign policy.[192] Kogan acknowledges that the "good

---

[189] Ibid.
[190] Ibid.
[191] Ibid.
[192] Ibid.

guys" vs. "bad guys" model is insufficient and that these allegiances are complicated but nevertheless asserts their importance.

Kogan showed an interest in these themes year before "Paris is Our Vietnam," such as in a piece called "How Music Creates Ideas" in the fourth issue of *Why Music Sucks*, a zine he published in the late 1980s. He wrote the piece in response to friend John Wójtowicz's contention that when he first heard John Coltrane's "Ascension" he was not thinking about what kind of person it would make him, calling into question Kogan's assertions about music and identity.[193] "So what if you began listening to 'Ascension' without thinking what kind of person you could consider yourself to be after hearing it?" Kogan wrote in reply.[194] He illustrates his point through a discussion of his own introduction to the Ohio Express, insisting that "there was an unconscious socioreasoning process that underlay my 'spontaneous' 'gut-level' reaction to 'Yummy Yummy Yummy.'"[195] Similarly, he tells Wójtowicz,

> When you listened to "Ascension" you weren't consciously thinking about what sort of person you were, you were *being* that sort of person—or perhaps changing yourself into that person! . . . So even if "legitimacy vs. illegitimacy" and "what sort of person does this make me?" don't start off as issues for you, they become issues soon enough—as soon as listening to

[193] Frank Kogan. "How Music Creates Ideas," in *Real Punks Don't Wear Black: Music Writing by Frank Kogan.* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006), 199.
[194] Ibid.
[195] Ibid.

> Coltrane intersects with your environment (which is probably as soon as it hits your ears, given internalization).[196]

Kogan refers throughout this piece to "Us" and "Them," with Wójtowicz quoted as wanting to "redefine 'them' to refer to the candyass whitebread anglo sexless protestants who go to parties and don't drink or dance or smoke dope."[197] Kogan writes that while there is more to Wójtowicz's enjoyment of "Ascension" than posturing (as he puts it, he's careful not to "reduce 'Ascension' to hairstyle"), his friend cannot negate his awareness of identity issues or the "unconscious socioreasoning" that stems from it.[198] He asserts that it is Wójtowicz's ability to hear "Ascension" not only "as hairstyle" but also "as music" and to hear it in relation to all the other music he likes ("World Saxophone Quartet, and Ornette Coleman, and also Teena Marie, Velvet Underground, Metallica") that distinguishes you from 'them.'"[199] Just as in his later piece Kogan seeks to distinguish himself from the anti-Paris camp, in this one he allied himself with his friend in an effort to distinguish themselves from "Them." However, in both cases, he acknowledges his own vested interest in seeing himself in a certain light, including an interest that is at times unconscious.

Wilson is referring to something related when he talks about trying to overcome his biases through the Céline project—he does not want to be the kind of person who would dislike music for the wrong reasons, which is why he must

---

[196] Ibid.
[197] Ibid., 200.
[198] Ibid.
[199] Ibid., 200.

attempt to like music for the right reasons. He recalls that when *Let's Talk About Love,* the album, first came out "I assumed that it was shallow, that it was beneath me. A decade later I don't see the advantage of holding yourself above things."[200] In response to objections people have made to the project, he writes:

> A few people have asked me, isn't life too short to waste time on art you dislike? But lately I feel like life is too short not to. I began this experiment with abstract questions about how taste functions, but I've come to see that it was more personal: I am nearing my fortieth birthday, half-willingly being carried out the exit of youth culture, and I've begun to wonder what kind of person that will make me. I cringe when I think what a subcultural snob I was five or ten years ago, and worse in my teens and twenties, how vigilant I was about being *taken in*—unaware that I was also refusing an invitation *out*. . . .
>
> For me, adulthood is turning out to be about becoming democratic.[201]

Although this admission comes only near the end of Wilson's book, it colors the entirety of his analysis. Like Kogan, Wilson does not want to be the kind of person who dislikes a given thing so he is motivated to like it.

Wilson also distinguishes himself from other types of people, most notably academics. In a caricatured portrayal of academic discourse, he writes that "even in the ostensibly more serious realm of academia, notably Cultural Studies, the idea of 'resistant' reading—that audiences make self-empowering, anti-establishment

---

[200] Wilson, *Let's Talk About Love,* 148.
[201] Ibid., 150–51.

reinterpretations of mainstream culture—can be merely a reverse justification of personal taste," claiming that academics simply ascribe "subversive" messages to music and artists that they personally prefer.[202] If, Wilson writes, "as Bourdieu believed, aesthetics are mostly a disguise for political relationships" then "to . . . use politics as a further disguise for your aesthetics is to build a hall of mirrors. Since power is a dynamic that permeates even the most microscopic interactions, you can find submission or resistance in any cultural figure or artifact if you look, but it can be misleading to do so selectively, and break pop culture down into quiescent versus subversive blocs."[203]

This is, of course, a baseless accusation to make of the Cultural Studies field and of academia more generally. Certainly, bad scholarship of the sort Wilson describes exists, but it is not representative of quality academic work on popular media. "Why, finally, should subversion be the sine qua non?" Wilson adds. "Fans, after all, are not always busy resisting and recontextualizing their idols—they also support, defend and identify with them."[204] Unfortunately, ideas such as Wilson's perception that cultural studies "break[s] pop culture into quiescent versus subversive blocs" and views resistance as "the sine qua non" are not uncommon, but they are inaccurate.

In a 2009 piece for *The Chronicle of Higher Education,* Michael Bérubé writes about the mixed legacy of cultural studies scholarship, focusing largely on the ways

[202] Ibid., 126.
[203] Ibid., 126–7.
[204] Ibid., 127.

it has been misunderstood and its insights (particularly of the political variety) ignored.[205] Cultural studies, he writes, "has been understood, which is to say misunderstood, as coextensive with the study of popular culture. . . . The result is that cultural studies now means everything and nothing; it has effectively been conflated with 'cultural criticism' in general, and associated with a cheery 'Pop culture is fun!' approach."[206] But even more importantly for Bérubé, "cultural studies has had negligible impact on the American academic left in a political sense" because "much of the American academic left continues to subscribe to the 'manufacturing consent' model, in which people are led to misidentify their real interests by the machinations of the corporate mass media."[207]

In contrast, Bérubé writes, "cultural studies has taught us—or has tried to teach us—that you don't know the meaning of a mass-cultural artifact until you find out what those masses of people actually do with it."[208] He elaborates with a quote from Hall:

> It is a highly unstable theory about the world which has to assume that vast numbers of ordinary people, mentally equipped in much the same way as you or I, can simply be thoroughly and systematically duped into misrecognizing entirely where their real interests lie. Even less acceptable is the position that, whereas "they"—the masses—are the dupes of history,

---

[205] Michael Bérubé, "What's the Matter With Cultural Studies?" *The Chronicle Review,* September 14, 2009, http://chronicle.com/article/Whats-the-Matter-With/48334.
[206] Ibid.
[207] Ibid.
[208] Ibid.

"we"—the privileged—are somehow without a trace of illusion and can see, transitively, right through into the truth, the essence, of a situation.[209]

This argument can easily be adjusted to suit a discussion of popular music aesthetics. Indeed, changing a few terms might make it sound like something Wilson would say himself. Through this statement, Hall places himself in opposition to an elitist stance that portrays the "masses" as misguided dupes, much as Wilson seeks to oppose himself to elitist popular music discourse. The danger of this sort of theorizing, though, is that in trying to point out a crucial perspective one runs the risk of, in effect, claiming access to the "truth" or "essence" of reality in the process.

However, Wilson uses another opposition to define himself—that of contrasting himself to academics, whose positions he caricatures while at the same time shoring up his own argument with quotes from scholars like Bourdieu. In the process, Wilson's dilettantism creates a distorted view of academic theory for a multitude of readers. His suspicion of contemporary scholarship seems to stem from a common stereotypical view of academia as a haven of elitism, evidenced when he writes things like this: "An academic might be able to dismiss public taste completely in favor of the weird and challenging, but a working pop critic who did so would be (rightly) out of a job in the long run"; and "academics, as the studies themselves show [tellingly, Wilson has no references to back up this assertion], are nearly the only group in contemporary society that still pays most of its attention to

[209] Ibid.

high culture."[210] Beginning with such suppositions, it is no wonder Wilson finds little to endorse in academic work on his topic of study. Yet at the same time, he banks on the legitimacy that his references to academic theory afford him. As always, the oppositions through which we intend to shore up certain identities for ourselves tend to cut both ways.

The poptimist critics I have discussed tailor their approaches to support a certain type of identity for themselves, either by forming alliances with or placing themselves in opposition to different groups. Frere-Jones and Hopper cast themselves as anti-racist crusaders, Wilson attempts to shed his snobbishness and become a populist, and Kogan distinguishes himself from rock-throwing counterprotestors and Hilton haters by embracing what they condemn. In the process, they engage with contemporary discourses of identity and difference in complex ways. Their goals are commendable, but their tendency toward oversimplification prevents them from coming to a more profound understanding of these issues.

Throughout my exploration of poptimist discourse, I have found that despite its ostensible populist ideals, it is structured by traditions associated with social groups that possess a degree of high cultural capital. Basically, it attempts to employ highbrow strategies in the service of populism with questionable results. Whether knowingly or unknowingly, by using strategies like intellectualization and omnivorousness that excludes the middlebrow, poptimist critics play it safe,

---

[210] Wilson, *Let's Talk About Love,* 13–14, 97.

maintaining their cultural capital according to traditional standards and undermining their admirable goals.

Chapter Four: Value and Emotion

This chapter will focus on a couple of aspects of musical taste that I have neglected up to this point, but which underlie much of what I have already covered. One is the question of value judgments. They are ostensibly the raison d'être of music journalists (who are known to the general public mostly as writers of album reviews), but like the other factors I have discussed so far, making value judgments is a much more complex matter than it might seem on the surface. To this end, I will discuss a number of music genres widely labeled as "bad," including country, heavy metal, and "sob pop," and a number of qualities often attributed to "bad music," variations on ineptitude and the self-indulgence.

The other topic I will focus on is the role of emotion. I have already touched on a number of intensely fraught areas in which it plays a role, such as questions of identity. Emotion is at the center of many of the central ideas of poptimism, such as the guilty emotions that poptimism (by definition) rejects in the case of the "guilty pleasure" on the one hand but which, on the other hand, Wilson suggests cultivating when he advocates the "guilty displeasure." I will talk about the politics of emotional reactions and how this pertains to poptimist musical aesthetics and look into what contemporary music critics have to say about emotions. These emotional issues are particularly significant when it comes to value judgments, as I will outline in more detail. In my conclusion, I will then explain how these variables interact with the other terms of my analysis so far and sum up my thoughts on the poptimist project.

Value judgments: Avoidance in the Classroom, a Brawl in the Hallway

As I described in chapters two and three, a number of complications that can arise when one seeks to make value judgments about popular music, most significantly around identity and authenticity. But even aside from these concerns, the very act of making judgments of textual value is itself a very complex matter.

Simon Frith explains this in his book *Performing Rites*. One of the strongest portions of his chapter on value is its exploration of academics' resistance to value judgments. "The importance of value judgment for popular culture . . . seems obvious, but it has been quite neglected in academic cultural studies," Frith writes.[211] He admits that he has experienced this difficulty as well: "I may have spent the last twenty years writing pop and rock criticism, judging records for a living, but I have tended to keep such arguments (plunging assertively into fan talk at the bar and in the record store) out of my academic work."[212]

This results in a state of affairs in which, according to Frith, while "contemporary popular culture may now be a familiar topic on the curriculum, in being constituted as a fit object for study it has become an oddly bloodless affair—the aesthetics of the popular continues to be at best neglected and at worst dismissed." [213] He goes on to explain:

---

[211] Simon Frith. *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 9.
[212] Ibid.
[213] Ibid., 11.

> One obvious reason for neglect is that cultural studies emerged from disciplines in which questions of taste and judgment were already kept well away from issues of academic analysis and assessment. Sociologists, anthropologists, and social and cultural historians have always been wary of proclaiming the activities they study as good or bad (such judgments are not their business); perhaps more surprisingly, 'evaluation,' as Barbara Herrnstein Smith suggests, was also long ago apparently 'exiled' from literary criticism.

In other words, according Frith, scholars who study popular culture have reasons for avoiding evaluation that are influenced by the disciplinary heritage of cultural studies. However, other factors support their reluctance. Frith describes an epiphany he had during a seminar discussion about this issue: "what became clear to me was that the issue wasn't really value but authority: the question was not whether Barbara Cartland (or the Pet Shop Boys) are any good or not, but who has the authority to say so."[214] Frith seems to imply here, as I would argue explicitly, that these concerns about authority are warranted. Given cultural studies scholars' critical attitude toward hegemony, it is understandable that they would be loath to mobilize the cultural capital inherent in the academy to champion their preferred texts.

[214] Ibid., 9.

Frith points out some problems with this stance, including the fact that no matter how much one might avoid value judgments in professional spaces, they seem to pop up elsewhere;

> there is still a split between what Frank Kogan describes as the discourse of the classroom (with its focus on a subject matter) and the discourse of the hallway (with its focus on oneself and one's opinions about a subject matter and one's opinions about other people's opinions about a subject matter and one's opinions about other people).[215]

This split causes Frith some cognitive dissonance: "If, in my own cultural practice, I prefer" certain things to others, he writes, "shouldn't I be prepared to argue the case for my values? . . . Shouldn't I be able to persuade [others] with classroom as well as hallway arguments?"[216]

To digress for a moment, another aspect of Frith's analysis of value judgments in academia is pertinent to my discussion of poptimism. He points out a strain of populism within cultural studies that looks for value in texts that are well-loved by large numbers of consumers in an attempt to "deny (or reverse) the usual high/low cultural hierarchy."[217] This tendency closely resembles Carl Wilson's anti-elitist goals. As Frith contends, when practiced in a scholarly setting this approach is problematic not politically, but sociologically.[218] "The populist position is that

---

[215] Ibid., 12.
[216] Ibid., 16.
[217] Ibid., 16.
[218] Ibid., 15.

whatever our (class-bound) personal tastes and values may be, we have to accept that sales figures, box office returns, and record charts tell us what 'the people' want," Frith writes, but he finds, upon closer examination, that "the equation of popular culture with market choice is problematic."[219] He points out that "[e]ven if such figures were accurate (which is doubtful), they provide no evidence as to why such goods are chosen by their consumers nor whether they are actually enjoyed or valued by them."[220] Putting it another way, he sums up his qualms about this approach with the question, "Are market choices (as measured somewhat inaccurately by culture industries' own research devices) really all we mean by 'the popular'?"[221] If this is indeed our operating assumption, he writes, the end result is that "the more celebratory the populist study, the more patronizing its tone."[222] This argument's relevance to Wilson's work on Céline Dion is readily apparent. If Wilson's choice of Dion as a subject is motivated by a desire to reconcile her popularity with his own dislike, as he writes, it is crucial to understand whether her sales figures denote a true popularity, a meaningful place in the lives of consumers, or not. But this question never comes up for Wilson.

Now I would like to return to the question of hallway and classroom discourses. Jason Mittell covers some similar territory in a recent blog post which includes the current draft of a chapter in process. The piece, intended for an

[219] Ibid., 15.
[220] Ibid.
[221] Ibid., 16.
[222] Ibid.

anthology on the series *Mad Men*, is about Mittell's personal dislike of the show, and this topic lends itself to an exploration of how personal taste and academic study intersect. He points out that "[h]umanities scholars don't typically brand ourselves as fans of our objects of research" even though "our practices . . . are often quite fannish."[223] However, there has been a shift, he writes, in this respect: "many scholars of contemporary popular culture have followed Henry Jenkins's lead by self-proclaiming our allegiances as 'aca-fans,' a hybrid of academic and fan critics that acknowledges and interweaves both intellectual and emotional cultural engagements."[224] And since emotional engagements influence intellectual ones, Mittell shows, the sort of material that dominates media studies shows that "taste structures what we choose to write about."[225]

> While media scholars do not solely write about what we like, the prevalence of books focused on "quality television" shows that appeal to academics like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *The Sopranos*, and now *Mad Men* – especially when compared to the lack of similar volumes or essays about more lowbrow or mainstream programs – suggests that taste is often more of a motivating factor for our scholarship than we admit.[226]

These emotional engagements are the stuff of Frith's hallway talk, whereas classroom talk has traditionally been confined to more intellectual arguments (even

---

[223] Jason Mittell. "On Disliking Mad Men," Just TV, posted July 29, 2010, http://justtv.wordpress.com/2010/07/29/on-disliking-mad-men (accessed August 4, 2010).
[224] Ibid.
[225] Ibid.
[226] Ibid.

when these intellectual arguments are, in effect, a smokescreen for or an afterthought to emotional ones).

Part of the reason Frith chafes at not to be able to use classroom ideas in hallway arguments is that he believes that arguments about value are a crucial part of our enjoyment of music fandom. He writes, "[p]art of the pleasure of popular culture is talking about it; part of its meaning is this talk, talk which is run through with value judgments. To be engaged with popular culture is to be discriminating . . . 'Good' and 'bad' or their vernacular versions ('brilliant,' 'crap') are the most frequent terms in everyday cultural conversation. "[227] Frith goes on to add that, specifically, the value judgments made in this kind of talk are not just about stating value but explicitly aimed at convincing others: "[v]alue arguments, in other words, aren't simply rituals of 'I like/you like' . . . they are based in reason, evidence, persuasion."[228] He quotes Frank Kogan from their personal correspondence on pop culture arguments as an enjoyable "brawl": "we continually change our minds about what is good or bad, relevant or irrelevant, 'awesome' or 'trivial' . . . but we never cease to believe that such distinctions are necessary 'social pressure points, gathering spots for a brawl over how we use our terms. If our comparisons stood still, how could we have our brawl?'"[229]

Assigning value would seem to be a simpler matter for music journalists. After all, people who are paid to evaluate albums (particularly if they write reviews

[227] Frith, *Performing Rites*, 4.
[228] Ibid.
[229] Ibid., 6.

for a publication or web site that assigns different releases numerical scores, like Pitchfork Media's famous ten-point scale with decimal points) can hardly claim that a taboo prevents them them from expressing likes and dislikes. Yet, as I have argued in previous chapters, music journalists' choices about what to like and dislike and what arguments to employ in the "brawl" of music fandom are full of personal and political implications of which many (not all, perhaps, but those whom I have discussed so far) are acutely aware. As the populist strivings of poptimism clearly demonstrate, these implications include concerns about authority and cultural capital that are not entirely dissimilar from the concerns that constrain academics. But unlike academics, music critics cannot readily avoid value judgments. Assessments of value are inextricable from critics' work, not only when they are explicit, as in the case of album reviews, but also when they are implicit (such as the endorsement that is implied when a journalist interviews a musician) or interwoven with complex discussions in columns, articles, and blog posts.

Bad genres and bad musicians

The conflict between the imperative to use value judgments and a discomfort with their implications seems to be quite a recent development and not a universal one. In her article "Rock Critics Need Bad Music," Deena Weinstein describes a very different dynamic among music journalists—or at least it seems so at first. "I like

metal," Weinstein writes, "[a]nd most mainstream rock critics have labeled metal as *Bad Music*."[230] She describes observing a "nearly blanket dismissal" of her favorite genre, "a form of music that I appreciate not only viscerally but reflectively," which motivated her to explore the reasons for critics' near-unanimous disapproval of metal.[231]

Weinstein finds a number of reasons for critics' antipathy that will sound familiar to readers of this thesis. She notes, using examples, that "the most frequent attacks on metal . . . have nothing to do with music or elements of performance . . . but with metal's audience. The critics seem to grasp the genre through its fans and they definitely don't identify with these folk."[232] She points out that "metal fans were radically Other to the critics in several ways," including an "age gap" and "an education divide" with a corresponding class disparity.[233] Metal also does not conform to rock critics' standards of authenticity.[234]

However, she concludes that the primary reason for critics' uniform dislike of metal is simply that they needed a "bête noire," an explanation that became clear to her when metal declined in popularity and critics had to find new genres to serve the same function.[235] They need such a "bête noire" because, according to Weinstein,

---

[230] Deena Weinstein, "Rock Critics Need Bad Music," in *Bad Music: The Music We Love to Hate*, ed. Christopher J. Washburne and Maiken Derno (New York: Routledge, 2004), 295.
[231] Ibid., 297.
[232] Ibid., 301.
[233] Ibid., 301.
[234] Ibid., 300 and 303.
[235] Ibid., 304.

popular music journalists "are adversarial critics; they seem to need an Other to detract from and are not content with either sympathetic appreciation or passionate advocacy," unlike other critical traditions that are not so deeply oppositional.[236] One reason for this, Weinstein contends, is that because "rock originated as youth music" it still "carries the stench of the high school lunchroom" and the "normal status anxieties of adolescence" live on in music critics' insecurity.[237]

Yet she sees the main source of this adversarial stance in defensiveness about aesthetic problems within rock criticism: not only is rock music's low-culture pedigree at odds with critics' "bid to be taken seriously," but more importantly, "rock criticism has never developed self-conscious and reflexive standards defining the characteristics of good music."[238] She sees rock critics as experiencing "acute anxiety about making independent judgments about new music" because of "the absence of a tradition and a discourse of cultural theory" and finds that "in place of consensual or contested standards, they try to anticipate what their colleagues will esteem, setting off a ceaseless quest to tap into the 'buzz.'"[239] In this context, Weinstein says, it is much easier to find consensus about bad music than it is to make positive judgments with assurance:

> In the throes of anxious anticipation, rock critics find some safety in being able to use bad music as a negation of whatever they decide to call good; at

[236] Ibid., 305.
[237] Ibid., 305–306.
[238] Ibid., 306.
[239] Ibid.

> least they can all agree on something and be sure of corroboration . . . . Rock critics also want their audience to take them seriously. In light of their root insecurity about their affirmative judgments, they rely on bashing bad music to ingratiate themselves with their readers.[240]

Frith backs Weinstein's assertions up to a certain extent. "For most rock critics," he writes, "(this was certainly my experience), the issue in the end isn't so much representing music to the public" as it is "orchestrating a collusion between selected musicians and an equally select part of the public—select in its superiority to the ordinary, undiscriminating pop consumer."[241]

In sum, the state of affairs Weinstein describes both corresponds and fails to correspond with what I have observed about contemporary music criticism. Clearly, given that efforts like Wilson's Céline project not only occur but generate a high degree of interest in the music community (as Wilson's EMP paper and the resulting book indeed did), "bashing bad music" is not a universally accepted strategy for attaining legitimacy as a music critic. At the same time, the anxiety about value judgments she describes is apparent in Wilson's project and other poptimist tendencies, not on the affirmative side but the negative; this puts added weight behind Weinstein's claims about a lack of communal standards in music criticism.

Aaron A. Fox talks about another "bad" genre, country, in "White Trash Alchemies of the Abject Sublime: Country as 'Bad' Music." Just as Weinstein relates

---

[240] Ibid., 307.
[241] Frith, *Performing Rites*, 67.

critical dislike of metal to attitudes toward the genre's fan base, Fox attributes country's "bad" status in part to its implications for identity—Weinstein's critics express distaste for metal fans, while according to Fox, "country frequently stands for the cultural badness of its adherents."[242] In addition to its working-class associations, "for many cosmopolitan Americans, especially," he writes, "country is 'bad' music precisely because it is widely understood to signify an explicit claim to whiteness, not as an unmarked, neutral condition of lacking (or trying to shed) race, but as a marked, foregrounded claim of cultural identity—a bad whiteness . . . ."[243] But country's "badness" has a paradoxical potential; it "is also available as the engine of a powerful ironic nostalgia characteristic of so many postmodern appropriations of country" which either "shade toward gleeful deconstruction of 'roots' mythologies" or "toward the reverent nostalgic cultivation of these same mythologies within a cosmopolitan sensibility."[244]

If country can be appropriated in such an intricate, mediated way, what does that say about more typical, lowbrow country texts and their reception? Fox sees a greater degree of complexity than just a simple, unproblematic identification with the genre, which he explains by use of an intriguing metaphor:

> Like a cigarette, a country song (bad or good, canonical or disposable) arrives in the form of a consumable commodity—with a price. It is consumed in a fit

---

[242] Aaron A. Fox, "White Trash Alchemies of the Abject Sublime: Country as 'Bad' Music," in *Bad Music: The Music We Love to Hate*, ed. Christopher J. Washburne and Maiken Derno (New York: Routledge, 2004), 44.
[243] Ibid.
[244] Ibid., 47.

> of self-assertion mixed with self-loathing. With a passion for pain as a feeling one can at least inflict sometimes on oneself, at a moment and under conditions of one's own choosing . . . [245]

In other words, as he goes on to write, when it comes to country music, "[i]t's all good *because* it's all bad."[246] Fox sees "badness" as a "cultural logic, determined by social relations structured in hegemonic dominance and resistance, ease and abjection," and concludes that it is thus "a futile task to theorize badness as a condition of style, as an effect of mass production, or as an entailment of mass consumption."[247]

Yet another scholar, Leslie M. Meier, notes similar dynamics at work in critical disapproval of music that is seen as excessively emotional. Like Fox and Weinstein, Meier notes in her article "In Excess? Body Genres, 'Bad' Music, and the Judgment of Audiences" that "certain performers stand in for certain audiences, and, hence, cultural values and practices. The question becomes *which* audiences and values are valorized or dismissed and why."[248] Meier's article focuses on two groups of music labeled as "bad": the "Filthy Fifteen," "a listing of 'objectionable' songs" collected by the Parents Music Resource Center (or PMRC) and a 2004 article in *Blender* magazine called "Run for Your Life: It's the 50 Worst Songs Ever!"[249] Her

---

[245] Ibid., 55.
[246] Ibid., 59.
[247] Ibid.
[248] Leslie M. Meier. "In Excess? Body Genres, 'Bad' Music, and the Judgment of Audiences," *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 20:3: 243.
[249] Ibid., 242.

examination of the *Blender* piece is most pertinent to my discussion since it is an index of critical rather than parental distaste.

Meier uses the term "sob pop" to describe "music that targets females (and sometimes males) in the role of love interest, often triggering 'irrational' displays of emotion."[250] She specifically mentions Céline Dion as an example of a "sob pop" performer, one whose songs "express excessive portrayals of love, loss, and sacrifice, and cater to the sensational body."[251] After a survey of both sets of songs, Meier concludes: "while excessive sex and violence are deemed 'bad' by concerned parents, excessive sentimentality is considered a sign of 'bad' music to the critic."[252] Specifically, she connects critical dislike of "sob pop" to its perceived appeal to women and associations with stereotypically feminine traits: "[i]f the distinction between good and bad is largely a matter of who listens, it is significant that the cultural authorities who help determine authentic popular music are primarily men with an interest in rock—or women who have to enact a type of 'journalistic drag' to get published."[253]

On a related note, as I mentioned in my first chapter, Wilson notes the negative connotations sentimentality has with many critics and fans in his discussion of Dion. He connects this to concerns about authenticity, noting protests

[250] Ibid., 250–1.
[251] Ibid, 251.
[252] Ibid., 255.
[253] Ibid., 246.

that sentimental music is "manipulative" and "phony," criticisms he dismisses.[254] He shows in the process that sob pop's perceived lack of authenticity is a significant factor in its abject status.

All three of these analyses of "bad" music contend that at least to some degree, the abjection of a genre reflects negative associations with its perceived audience, which in every case is made up of members of an oppressed group (the working class, the rural poor, and women). Correspondingly, each one relies on the idea of musical taste as structuring identity through the mobilization of difference.

In other respects, the three articles differ significantly. Weinstein emphasizes music criticism's lack of shared aesthetic standards as causing its reliance on an adversarial critical stance while Fox and Meier do not address the potential motivations of music critics. Fox, however, goes into greater detail than either Weinstein or Meier about the experience of "bad" genre fans. Yet, by cobbling a picture together from all three perspectives, one can arrive at a useful model of value judgments toward abject genres. Clearly, identity is a major factor, given the class and gender differences noted in each of these three abject genres. While many genres associated with oppressed groups are readily coopted by high-status consumers, some are not.

How do these ideas square with the populist tendencies of poptimist critics? Certainly, their interest in lowbrow genres distinguishes them from the critics

---

[254] Carl Wilson. *Céline Dion's Let's Talk About Love: A Journey to the End of Taste.* (New York: Continuum Publishing Group, 2007), 123.

portrayed in Weinstein and Meier's articles or the "cosmopolitan" types Fox describes. Wilson's Céline project is an attempt to cultivate an appreciation for the archetypal "sob pop" chanteuse. Alec Hanley Bemis references Chuck Eddy's penchant for Toby Keith as a topic for his intellectual musings, so country music has not been ignored either.

As for heavy metal, its position with critics has undergone a radical change. It has gained currency among contemporary hipsters; as Brandon Stosuy wrote in a *Slate* piece in August 2005 titled *Heavy Metal: It's alive and flourishing*, metal "recently conquered a new frontier, making an unexpected crossover into the realm of hipsterdom. . . . The current revival seems to be a natural mutation from the hipster fascination with post-punk, noise, and no wave."[255] Its position has shifted so greatly that even the most elitist critic would not find fault with it. But taking an interest in lowbrow genres is, as I have already discussed, a well-established practice within privileged omnivorous consumption, and hardly a guaranteed strategy for avoiding elitism. It is not surprising that hipsters mobilized this strategy in the case of heavy metal, and similarly, it remains a favorite strategy for poptimists.

If I may digress for a moment, it is worth noting that heavy metal's rise among the hipster audience is not only consistent with omnivorous highbrow reception practices, it is also just one of a long list of genres to be appropriated in

[255] Brandon Stosuy, "Heavy Metal: It's alive and flourishing." *Slate*, August 19, 2005, http://www.slate.com/id/2124692 (accessed June 10, 2010).

this fashion. Wilson points to "cycles of revisionism" in the music critic community that go hand in hand with this dynamic.[256] He attributes the practice, in part, to efforts at self-advancement, writing that "one way a critic often can get noticed is by arguing that some music everyone has trashed is in fact genius" and that the cumulative effect of numbers of critics making such arguments is that "over the years that process has 'reclaimed' genres from metal to disco to lounge exotica and prog rock, and artists from ABBA to Motorhead."[257] Tellingly, it is this very process that Wilson says inspires his doubts about music critics' value judgments in the present, particularly when it came to mainstream pop. "This epidemic of second thought made critical scorn generally seem a tad shady: If critics were so wrong about disco in the 1970s, why not about Britney Spears now? Why did pop music have to get old before getting a fair shake?"[258]

Fox's notion of the so-bad-it's-good appeal of country music also has interesting implications for an analysis of poptimism and omnivorous consumption. Efforts such as Wilson's, which are aimed at finding value in music that is appreciated by a wide audience in order to combat elitism, take on a different cast considering Fox's argument that an essential part of what country fans enjoy about the genre is its very abjectness. On a similar note, if the end result of efforts like Wilson's is reaching a consensus about the value of popular genres, this would prevent fans from engaging in the sort of pleasurable aesthetic "brawl" that Frith

[256] Wilson, *Let's Talk About Love*, 12.
[257] Ibid., 12–13.
[258] Ibid., 13.

and Kogan contend is at the heart of much of contemporary social music practices. In both respects, the success of an undertaking like the Céline project could result in the foreclosure of listener's pleasures.

In addition to "bad" genres, there are other conventional notions of "badness." Frith asserts that in the eyes of musicians and many fans, "bad music seems to fall into two broad categories."[259] The first is "*incompetent* music," which is generally attributed to the fact that a musician is "*untutored* (which may mean . . . that they are simply unable to do certain things because they haven't been taught how to) . . . or that they are *unprofessional* (they're unwilling to learn proper techniques)."[260] The second category belongs to music that is "*self-indulgent*":

> this criticism . . . seems to conflate at least three different sorts of description: . . . *selfishness*: bad musicians forget that 'good music' is a collective practice, and use performance to show off their own virtuosity or character . . . *emptiness*: bad musicians indulge in form at the expense of content. . . . such musicians play something only to show that they can. . . . *incomprehensibility*: bad musicians play in a completely introverted way . . . . Their music is not communicative; it does not acknowledge or address an audience. [261]

[259] Frith, *Performing Rites*, 57.
[260] Ibid.
[261] Ibid., 57–58.

He concludes that given these standards of bad music, it is apparent that for those who adhere to them, "'creativity' cannot be judged in abstraction; it has to be defined in terms of music's perceived social and communicative functions."[262]

Frith then adds, shifting the subject slightly, that "when musicians talk about good and bad music they reveal an aesthetic as strongly rooted in ethical values and a sense of responsibility (to each other, to ideal listeners) as in technical values," a point he clarifies further when he writes: "Critical musical judgments . . . are almost always entangled with social explanations of why the music is good or bad, and much of our day-to-day argument about music is conducted in just this way: aesthetic judgments are tangled up with ethical judgments."[263]

The idea that critics' standards have an ethical component should come as no surprise given my discussion thus far. The critique of rockism is primarily a critique of its ethical foundations, such as beliefs about authenticity (notable for their simplicity and failure to account for reflexivity, critiqued as outmoded) and a tendency to valorize left-wing political content and countercultural trappings (also an approach that is seen as reflecting an outdated political position). Poptimists and other critics of rockism have their own ethical preoccupations, from Hopper's and Frere-Jones's concerns about race to Wilson's concerns about elitism and classism.

Frith goes on to connect this ethical dimension with his belief in the necessity of musical disagreement and with my other topic for this chapter, emotion. "The

[262] Ibid., 58.
[263] Ibid., 58, 70.

marking off of some tracks and genres and artists as 'good' and others as 'bad' seems to be a necessary part of popular music pleasure and use," he writes. "And 'good' and 'bad' are key words because they suggest that aesthetic and ethical judgments are tied together: not to like a record is not just a matter of taste; it is also a matter of morality."[264] But he sees another factor underlying the others: that of emotion. He writes that although he has "translated this evaluative process into . . . a matter of discourse, what's really at issue is feeling."[265]

> In the end, 'bad music' describes an emotional rather than an ideological judgment. We don't like a record; we then seek to account for that dislike (we don't, on the whole, arm ourselves with a grid of ideological consistency through which everything must pass before we feel it). Feelings, particularly feelings of like or dislike—for music, for people—are often surprising, contradictory, and disruptive; they go against what we're supposed to feel, what we'd like to feel. The important point here is not that critical judgment is always a process of justification (and not really explanation), but that the feelings it describes are real (and not just discursive).

Frith's views on the primacy of emotion are compelling, but many scholars would question the idea that something as socially determined (arguably, overdetermined) as aesthetic taste could possibly begin with a pure emotional component or that the role of discourse is only to facilitate after-the-fact

[264] Ibid., 72.
[265] Ibid., 72.

rationalizations of visceral reactions. This difficult question—how reason and emotion interact in the formation of aesthetic judgments—is at the crux of many of the most significant debates in contemporary music criticism, including the Céline project and the controversy over Stephin Merritt's EMP comments.

Reexamining the Significance of Emotion

In her article "Reason and Emotion," Miranda Fricker explores the relationship between these two terms and the political significance of our approach to them. She begins her exploration in an effort to resolve "an apparent conflict between the implicit teachings of Western philosophy and feminism," caused by the fact that on the one hand, "philosophy advises that we should place our trust, if anywhere, in reason," but on the other hand, "feminism has learned that it is a political imperative to acknowledge, share and thereby validate the ways in which women's emotions may conflict with accepted modes of reasoning."[266]

As a feminist philosopher, Fricker feels a need to resolve this seeming contradiction. She begins by noting that placing emotion and reason in conflict in the first place means "perpetuat[ing] the Cartesian dualism of mind and body, reason and emotion, contributing to a false polarization" which "should be abandoned for an interactive model in which neither partner dominates."[267] Rather

[266] Miranda Fricker. "Reason and Emotion" in *Radical Philosophy* 57, (1991): 14.
[267] Ibid., 14.

than viewing reason and emotion as separable or viewing either as primary, she concludes that the two are "interdependent and mutually constitutive."[268]

Neither term, she points out, makes sense without reference to the other. "Reason presupposed emotion, since what is rational depends on emotional preferences about different possible conclusions or outcomes; and emotion presupposed reason since our emotions require rational interpretation if they are to come above ground."[269] How can one of these terms claim primacy or supremacy if each is so indispensable in constituting the other?

The political significance of this argument becomes clear when Fricker addresses the question of the cultural limitations placed on both emotion and reason. She asserts that "sensation and judgement acquire their form from the same mold," the "learning place" of our sociohistorical context.[270] More specifically, "emotions are inextricably linked to beliefs, beliefs which presuppose linguistic concepts and rational structures," such that "perhaps emotions are as deeply entrenched in patriarchal conceptual organisations as are the reasoning processes which structure belief."[271] As a feminist, Fricker's emphasis here is on the patriarchal nature of our learned cultural assumptions, but it is a simple matter to extend her formulation to cover all sorts of hegemonic influences.

---

[268] Ibid., 15.
[269] Ibid., 19.
[270] Ibid., 16.
[271] Ibid., 16.

Fricker demonstrates that a "cultural filter" fraught with ideological implications structures our ability not only to reason but to form beliefs and experience feelings, "open[ing] up difficult questions about the 'freedom' of our emotions."[272] Yet she finds a special potential in emotions that are "'subterranean,' not yet reasoned or articulated," those which "are not yet sanctioned and codified by accepted rationality."[273] Drawing from the powerful impact of consciousness-raising groups in the women's movement, Fricker gives emotions a special role as a "potentially subversive force," asserting that they have a kind of "partial autonomy."[274] She argues, "our emotions bear a looser and more flexible relation to the dominant ideology than does our reason since, while rationality can be moulded to serve the interests of a certain group, emotions cannot be wholly determined by those interests."[275]

This is not to say that emotion is to be trusted above reason in all cases (Fricker has already shown that position to be untenable). "Of course reason must regulate wayward emotions and prejudicial feelings, but equally emotion must regulate reason in order that accepted forms of interpretation and rationality do not brutalise and deny people's emotions, forbidding them their due interpretation, their meaning, and their political significance."[276]

---

[272] Ibid., 16.
[273] Ibid., 17–18.
[274] Ibid., 18.
[275] Ibid., 18.
[276] Ibid., 18.

Fricker's model provides some useful insights into poptimist discourse. Anti-rockist critics approach emotion in different ways depending on the context. For example, Wilson takes two different approaches to emotion in his study of Dion. Wilson regards some emotions with a great deal of suspicion. In one passage he decries the idea of the guilty pleasure but in the same breath, calls into question the legitimacy of musical pleasure: "Why not just follow your own enjoyment? Unless you have a thing for white-power anthems, the claim now goes, there is no reason ever to feel guilty or ashamed about what you like. And I agree, though it's curious how often critics' 'own enjoyment' still takes us all down similar paths at once."[277] He considers suspect both the guilt of the guilty pleasure and enjoyment derived from more socially acceptable music.

But shame is not always a bad thing in Wilson's eyes. He writes about the shame he experienced when his neighbors overheard him playing Dion's album *Let's Talk About Love* over and over again (and the shame he felt about feeling ashamed) as an illuminating experience.[278] "Shame has a way of throwing you back upon your own existence . . . [w]hich immediately makes the self feel incomplete, unjustified, a chasm of lack. It's the reverse of the sense of self-extension that having likes and dislikes usually provides. It is humbling."[279] This is the sort of sentiment that fellow critic Simon Reynolds has in mind when he writes that "these days it seems the only thing you should feel guilty about is your own feelings of guilt about liking

[277] Wilson, *Let's Talk About Love*, 13.
[278] Ibid., 150.
[279] Ibid., 150.

anything—or worse, guilt-tripping others with your value judgements and taste-stances."[280] As I mentioned in my introduction, Reynolds goes on to say that "[a]ll of this has a slight air of the Maoist self–criticism session about it."[281]

Wilson experiences a different kind of emotion when he sees Dion perform live in Las Vegas. This moment is the apotheosis of his exploration of her work, the closest he comes to really understanding how someone could love her music. It comes at a time when Wilson is feeling depressed about his recent divorce.[282]

> For a moment . . . Céline helped me feel that big, dumb emotion on a gut level. My usual, more 'sophisticated' listening can help me reflect on such feelings, to scrutinize them from all angles, but I'm fine at that kind of analysis on my own. I am probably less skilled at just feeling an emotion without wanting to mess with it and craft it, to bargain with it until it becomes something else. Feeling emotions fully, bodily, as they are, may be sentimentality's promise, one too readily mistaken for a threat.[283]

This is rather reminiscent of Meier's discussion of sob pop and gender, as he mentions not only the excessive emotion brought out by Dion's performance (with its traditionally feminine associations) but also the "bodily" aspect of that emotion, the physicality of which has still more connections to stereotypical femininity.

---

[280] Simon Reynolds. "There's a Wyatt Going On," Blissblog, posted June 6, 2006, http://blissout.blogspot.com/2006_06_01_blissout_archive.html#114962055324130149 (accessed July 23, 2010).
[281] Ibid.
[282] Wilson, *Let's Talk About Love*, 130.
[283] Ibid.

Unfortunately, Wilson was disappointed to find that he could not reconnect with this feeling when he returned home and put on recordings of Dion's music, but he recognizes it as the climax of his exploration of her work.

In a passage of Wilson's book I've quoted previously, Stephanie, one of the Céline fans he interviewed, decries the fact that "'we live in a society where people's visceral responses or emotional responses aren't really respected. And I think they should be. . . . Even if it's not cool."[284] It is fitting that Wilson uses this quote to lead in to his description of how he felt at Dion's Las Vegas performance. Although he does not say so explicitly, given his prominent placement of the quote he seems implicitly to agree with the sentiment and to grant the quote a great deal of significance.

Despite his appreciation of the "gut" feeling he experienced at the Céline show and the importance he places on Stephanie's comment about "visceral responses," Wilson remains suspicious of other, similar emotions. As I pointed out previously, he locates a feeling of disidentification in the same "gut" region when he writes that "[m]y aversion to Dion more closely resembles how put off I feel when someone says they're pro-life or a Republican: intellectually I'm aware how personal and complicated such affiliations can be, but my gut reactions are more crudely tribal."[285] Feeling "put off" by someone else's musical taste or trusting one's "own enjoyment" are both feelings Wilson does not trust. Instead of feeling these

[284] Ibid., 117.
[285] Ibid., 17.

emotions fully in the way he embraces being moved by Dion's music, he applies the very strategies mentioned earlier, choosing to "scrutinize" his distaste "from all angles," "messing with" his enjoyment, and reacting to each emotion by "bargain[ing] with it until it becomes something else."[286]

This disparity in Wilson's attitude toward emotion is somewhat contradictory, but it is also consistent. When his feelings lead him toward critical consensus and a high degree of cultural capital or when they impede his attempts at populism, he "bargains" with them. Yet he embraces them when they help him to appreciate music he thinks he should like. He uses intellectualization to quell feelings that are at odds with his goals while allowing himself to experience other emotions more freely. These goals are in line with his desired self-image; I mentioned earlier Wilson's profound regret about his former pretentiousness and his determination to turn over a new leaf in part, he admits, due to his approaching fortieth birthday (meaning that as long as he is "half-willingly being carried out the exit of youth culture," he might as well embrace a more "democratic" attitude that he finds more mature).[287]

The irony of Wilson's ambivalent approach is that when he attempts to use intellectualization in the service of populism, he is employing a strategy traditionally used to gain cultural capital. As Henry Jenkins points out in *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, "[t]he 'bourgeois' aesthetic Bourdieu

[286] Ibid., 130.
[287] Ibid., 150.

identifies often distrusts strong feelings and fears the loss of rational control suggested by intense and close engagement with the popular. Even when . . . critics [who adhere to this aesthetic] accept some popular culture as worthy of serious attention, they typically read popular works as if they were materials of elite culture, introducing 'a distance, a gap' between themselves and the text."[288]

Unlike Wilson, whose degree of distance varies somewhat, Jenkins writes that Bourdieu's 'bourgeois' viewers "consistently deny the pleasure of affective immediacy in favor of the insights gained by contemplative distance."[289] In addition to the implications distance has for cultural capital and class distinction, it also has gendered connotations. Jenkins paraphrases Mary Ann Doane, writing, "traditional masculinity provides spectators with some critical distance from media texts" while "the female spectator is often represented as drawn so close to the text that she is unable to view meanings."[290] But contrary to these stereotypes, Jenkins finds that intensely involved TV fans (many of them female) are not blind to their favorite shows' boundaries; rather, "the fan, while recognizing the story's constructedness, treats it as if its narrative world were a real place that can be inhabited and explored and as if the characters maintained a life beyond what was represented on the

[288] Henry Jenkins. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 60–61.
[289] Ibid., 61.
[290] Ibid., 61.

screen; fans draw close to that world in order to enjoy more fully the pleasure it offers them."[291]

Some music genres encourage a similarly passionate degree of fandom and maximum affective engagement. Emo (a highly contentious term which used to refer to a specific brand of hardcore punk in the 1980s but which was popularized, beginning in the mid-1990s, as a term for a newer type of overwrought pop-punk) is one such genre. In Andy Greenwald's *Nothing Feels Good: Punk Rock, Teenagers, and Emo,* he describes Rites of Spring, one of the most visible bands within emo's first wave, as "[bringing] together an inspired hodgepodge of individuals eager to convert private pain into public purging. At Rites of Spring shows, audience members would weep among strangers; hardened cynics would rock and sway like born-agains."[292] Greenwald also quotes Brett Matthews, a fan of the archetypal second-wave emo band Jawbreaker, describing his first experience seeing them perform live: "'they brought the entire crowd into a trance. They could transcend and transfer these emotions to the audience through these instrumental grooves.'"[293]

In addition to their intense affective engagement with their chosen texts or artists, Jenkins's television fans and Greenwald's emo kids have another quality in common: part of their enjoyment is social, integrally connected to their

---

[291] Ibid., 115.
[292] Ibid., 13.
[293] Andy Greenwald. *Nothing Feels Good: Punk Rock, Teenagers, and Emo*, (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2003), 21.

participation in a fan group. Following Bourdieu, critics like Wilson emphasize the way affiliations with certain texts can serve to differentiate fans from others, but this salient point should not overshadow the equally significant fact that these affiliations also bring fans together to enjoy beloved texts as a group.

It is possible to read associations with fan groups as nothing more than the other side of distinction; just as cultural capital can be gained by distinguishing oneself from abject groups, it can increase due to an affiliation with high-status ones. But the meaning that television watchers and emo listeners attach to their fandom clearly extends beyond social climbing. That both fan groups' chosen media texts are low on accepted cultural capital further supports this view: intense engagement with television texts has been somewhat normalized in recent years but was stigmatized during the period when Jenkins studied his subjects, and "emo kids" are frequently a subject of derision. To put it more clearly, every type of fandom has a type of cultural capital which, to extend the metaphor, has currency within the group; but fans of low-status texts accumulate a type of cultural capital that people outside their groups are unlikely to value. The Céline fans whose enjoyment Wilson accepts uncritically would fall in a similar category. Although he never states this clearly, it seems that he exempts them from scrutiny because the cultural capital they gain through their familiarity with Dion's work does not carry much currency in high-status circles.

This brings me back to my initial discussion of authenticity: Wilson views the enjoyment Dion fans take in her music as self-evidently authentic while doubting

similar feelings about higher-status cultural objects in both himself and others. Although I have proceeded in a linear fashion through my analysis, the terms authenticity, reflexivity, identity, difference, guilt, pleasure, value, and badness are interconnected in more ways than such a sequential narrative can convey. If I were to try to illustrate their relationship visually, they would form a tangled cloud rather than one smooth strand.

Musical reception contains aspects of all of these terms, and each are interconnected. Musical texts acquire, or fail to acquire, value in our minds and we invest, or fail to invest, in them emotionally. Within the context of a cultural field loaded with status implications for every taste decision, the ways in which we see ourselves or wish to see ourselves—in other words, our perception of our identities—affect our value judgments and emotional investments in complex ways. The existence of cultural capital may motivate us to align ourselves with high-status objects, or it may not. Our awareness of cultural capital's existence (an awareness most people share whether or not they are familiar with the term or the work of Bourdieu) and our reflexive view of ourselves cut both ways, causing us to blend in with the crowd or stand out from it, accept high-cultural modes of reception or rebel against them, depending on the context. All of these dynamics have a myriad of implications for identity politics. These are just a few of the connections between these concepts, a few of the strands that connect this tangle of ideas.

It is into this context that poptimism as a concept developed. "Superword," a term developed by Frank Kogan, helps to explain how difficult this concept is to pin down. As Kogan puts it in "Superwords Revisited,"

> a Superword is a word like "punk," which is among other things, a battleground, a weapon, a red cape, a prize, a flag in a bloody game of Capture the Flag. To put this in the abstract, a Superword is a word or phrase that not only is used in fights but that is itself fought over. The fight is over who gets to wear the word proudly, who gets the word affixed to himself against his will, etc. So the use is fought over, and this—the fight over usage—is a big part of the word's use. That is, we use the term in order to engage in arguments over how to use the term. [294]

In addition, Kogan writes, "a Superword isn't simply fought over," rather, "what makes a Superword really super is that some people use the word so that it will jettison adherents and go skipping on ahead of any possible embodiment."[295] Kogan's examples of Superwords are mostly genre terms, not terms that anyone would self-apply, but he still emphasizes their significance to identity.[296] "Genre names would be neither hot-button words nor Superwords if people didn't use them

---

[294] Frank Kogan. "Superwords Revisited," in *Real Punks Don't Wear Black: Music Writing by Frank Kogan*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006), 223.
[295] Ibid.
[296] Ibid.

to differentiate themselves from each other," he writes, adding that "we jigger the Superwords" in order to identify or disidentify with certain groups.[297]

Kogan has never named poptimism a Superword, but it clearly fits the definition. And pop, the genre term from which poptimism (sometimes simply called "popism") is derived, is an acknowledged Superword. If you find Kogan's formulation convincing, which I do, it helps to clarify the reason that so few music journalists explicitly self-identify as poptimists. It also makes sense that critics whose arguments I have identified as poptimist (Wilson, Frere-Jones, Hopper, Ewing, and Kogan himself) put such a focus on identity issues.

Conclusion

Nearing the end of my exploration of poptimism, I have come to some conclusions about this slippery term and how it relates to contemporary questions about identity, authenticity, emotion and value. Poptimism came into being in recent years for historically specific reasons. Many of the conventions of popular music journalism were formed in the 1960s. In the decades since then, a number of important factors have changed.

One important factor is that mass media forms have become increasingly accepted as legitimate objects of serious study. Film studies has developed a great deal of prestige, with television studies somewhat less accepted but gaining ground, and popular music studies, while still underdeveloped compared to scholarly work

[297] Ibid., 225–6.

on film and television, has made significant strides. Even for critics and fans who have never taken coursework in a media studies department, this shift in academic conventions has inevitable consequences. Academic references increasingly proliferate in popular music criticism; you might expect Wilson's references to Bourdieu and Kogan's obsession with science historian Thomas Kuhn to be exceptional, but allusions to theorists from Jacques Derrida to Slavoj Žižek in journalistic music writing have become rather commonplace.

I mentioned that popular music scholarship has not developed as fully as scholarship on other popular media. I believe that this is another reason for the rise of poptimism in recent years. While the awareness that popular forms can be viewed in highly complex intellectual ways has grown, actual development in popular music studies is rather stunted. Whether this is due to a greater lag in the recognition of popular music's importance, disciplinary turf wars within the academy, or any number of other factors is a question that lies outside of my discussion here, but one that would be well worth exploring in future research. Whatever the reasons behind it, the underdeveloped state of contemporary popular music scholarship has important implications for popular music journalists and fans.

The overt intellectualization of popular music writing, which amounts to a blurring of boundaries between scholarship and journalism, constitutes a form of compensation. In the absence of meaningful input from a vital, visible popular music studies community and saddled with outdated concepts that chafe under

contemporary conditions, writing by journalists and fans must pick up the slack. Given all of this, it makes sense that critics' efforts to integrate scholarly theory into their writing, while helpful at times, frequently results in distorted, out-of-context quotes that oversimplify the work of the scholars being referenced. To put it more simply, when journalists attempt to be academics, it makes sense that they seldom do a great job. But the reason for this, it seems to me, originates with failures within the academy.

Another significant shift that impacts poptimism is the increase in awareness of identity politics due to anti-racist, gay rights and women's liberation movements and other such factors. When the conventions of popular music criticism identified with rockism were solidifying in the middle of the twentieth century, journalists may not have been overly concerned with the politics of their representation of women, people of color, people on the GLBTQI continuum, the working class or other underprivileged groups, but as I have demonstrated in a multitude of examples, these considerations are very important to many critics today.

Changes in prevailing ideas about truth and authority also influenced poptimism. This shift is connected with, but not reducible to, the shift toward greater awareness of identity politics. It is this critical attitude toward assertions of self-evident truth and traditional sources of authority that fuels the anxiety about value judgments that Simon Frith describes within the academy. It also contributes to anxiety within the music critic community, along with other factors such as the lack of consensual standards pointed to by Deena Weinstein. One hallmark of

contemporary critical awareness is that insight is sought through placing ideas within an historical context. Another reason for anxiety within music criticism is the fact that this form of journalism has existed just long enough to have a significant history. It has only recently become possible for critics like Carl Wilson to realize that genres and artists that were once critically reviled have a consistent pattern of later reevaluation. Now that the history of this type of music criticism has developed enough for such retrospective analysis, this realization and others like it have the potential to call into question a number of practices within the music journalism community.

Poptimism is a reaction to all of these aspects of our own historical context. It is also part of a timeless cycle of aesthetic trends. Wilson notes that critics' desire to distinguish themselves from previous generations of critics perpetuates the cycle of aesthetic reclamation, but fails to note how his own efforts serve as yet another means of self-aggrandizement. After all, his book on the Céline project has garnered more attention than anything else in his career, selling briskly and leading to a great deal of recognition and even television appearances. Distinguishing oneself by critiquing the very notion of critique is a more original, sophisticated means of distinguishing oneself from other critics than simply championing a previously abject genre, but the result is largely the same.

Jody Rosen accuses anti-rockist critics of making poptimism "about critics working through their daddy issues and straining to prove they're hipper than Greil

Marcus."[298] This interpretation may be excessively cynical, but it has at least a grain of truth. Critics like Wilson can make a name for themselves by taking such stances, demonstrating their ability to do something new. Even if one takes Wilson's idealism at face value, trusting that the impetus for his study was a populist impulse, the benefits to his career and his ego that can be garnered by distinguishing himself from other critics remain significant.

The same could be said of every other poptimist or "anti-rockist" critic I have described in this study. Even when controversy comes up, as in the uproar over Jessica Hopper's and Sasha Frere-Jones's criticism of Stephin Merritt or the negative reaction to Kogan's "Paris Hilton is Our Vietnam" column, for writers in the commercial sphere there is no such thing as bad publicity, and all three have prospered in the aftermath of their respective controversies. Each of these three also made a statement about who they were in relation to established conventions within music criticism which fell in line with their desired images of themselves, a goal whose importance should not be underestimated.

The impulse to distinguish oneself from one's forebears and the desire to apply rigorous ethical standards to aesthetic judgments may sound like contradictory ones, but for the critics whose work I have examined, the two seem to come together seamlessly. After all, if one views one's forebears as possessed of some problematic ideas about identity politics, or simply complacent in the face of

[298] Jody Rosen. "The Perils of Poptimism: Does hating rock make you a music critic?" *Slate*, May 9, 2006, http://www.slate.com/id/2141418 (accessed August 4, 2010).

hegemonic ideas about aesthetics that were loaded with politically questionable baggage, distinguishing oneself from them would be an ethical matter as well as a matter of prestige. This, explicitly or implicitly, is the view put forth by the poptimist writers whose work I have explored.

Yet another possible cause for the development of poptimism is that along with anxiety about truth and authority there is a great deal of ambivalence in contemporary culture about authenticity. As I detailed in my second chapter, the prevailing attitude toward authenticity among popular music critics and serious fans is one that combines dismissal and longing. The notion of true authenticity is viewed derisively and others' pretensions of authenticity are deconstructed, but at the same time there is a palpable sense that authenticity continues to matter a great deal. The search for an unimpeachable form of musical authenticity can be seen at work behind a number of musical trends, from those that attempt to recapture a sense of realness by various means, such as the recent "freak folk" trend with its naïve outsider artists seemingly incapable of artifice, to those that embrace reflexivity by championing the unapologetic fakery of commercial pop.

When it comes to locating authenticity with artists, poptimism is linked more to the latter strategy than the former. As writing by Wilson and Ewing show, poptimist writing also seeks to locate authenticity in the process of reception via a different sort of reflexivity—the reflexivity of the thoughtful critic or fan who subjects his or her reception practices to rigorous scrutiny. In the absence of straightforward, believable standards of authenticity in the production process, the

search for authenticity in reception can serve as a substitute. Perhaps the content of a musical text cannot be guaranteed to be irreproachably sincere, but one's affective investment in it can be more thoroughly assured. Perhaps the rise of this approach could also be attributed to academic ideas making their way into the ethos, given that reception-oriented theories that give consumers a great deal of meaning-making agency have been developing in the academy for decades.

These parallels between academic theory, popular awareness, and music critic discourse occur at a number of points. What it all boils down to is an impulse to question the old ways of placing value on music and, in the process, asking how, if the people who formed these outdated standards in the past were wrong, we can be assured of our own rightness in forming new ones today. Academics have a special sort of responsibility here given their roles in the education system and the prestige they command in the popular consciousness. Yet music critics have a great deal of responsibility, too, as tastemakers and keepers of immense amounts of cultural capital (particularly of "coolness," which sometimes evades academics). The issue of authority is all the more fraught for music critics since they are expected to make value judgments regularly, a task which academics can (and often do) readily avoid. Academic music scholars, with the notable exception of Frith, have almost completely skirted the thorny issue of authority and the politics of value. But music critics have been forced to come up with a way of making value judgments so that they can do their jobs and still live with their consciences. This is the purpose of poptimist discourse.

But do poptimist approaches to music criticism actually create results that are progressive and populist? This question has been at the heart of my analysis, and unsurprisingly, the answer is not a simple one. Many aspects of poptimist writing work against its stated aims. One problem is the frequent use of academic references, which has a couple of significant downsides: first, these references are often misused, meaning that the insights scholarly theory could offer are squandered or mangled, and second, critics play into the dominant cultural capital game by borrowing the prestige of the academy to shore up their arguments and in the process, make their work less accessible to many potential readers.

Another problem is the rather two-dimensional view of identity politics embraced by many critics. As I demonstrated in my third chapter, many poptimist writers approach identity issues very reductively, oversimplifying the complex politics of representation. For example, simply listening to and liking music by racial minorities is not, by definition, necessarily anti-racist; in fact, this strategy can serve hegemonic ends, gobbling up diverse cultures for the enjoyment of privileged omnivores. Yet writers like Hopper and Frere-Jones champion neo-eclecticism as the unproblematic alternative to Merritt's supposed racism (though to his credit, Frere-Jones shows a greater awareness of the nuances of racial politics in other pieces). Poptimist critics also show a woeful lack of awareness of intersectionality, as evidenced by the argument that developed about which was a more primary problem with indie rock elitism—classism or racism—as opposed to a nuanced

model that would acknowledge that both issues, among others, could occur in combination without either taking special precedence.

Poptimists' awareness of authenticity issues is also somewhat lacking, as I noted in my second chapter. They have a critical attitude toward the traditional notions of authenticity so crucial to rockism, which makes sense given that qualms about authenticity have become so widespread. What they fail to account for is the continuing importance authenticity has for music listeners, which lingers under the surface of a great deal of fan and critic discourse although discussing it openly is seen as a bit gauche. It seems a shame that poptimists have not tackled these issues more fully. Their grasp of reflexivity in reception is well articulated and the mainstream pop they often endorse has a reflexive potential that could be read as supportive of a new, more tenable form of authenticity.

Poptimist critics' grasp of reception reflexivity is also limited by their haphazard treatment of identity issues. Their primary strategy for combating hegemony is to apply a reflexive position to their own tastes, with implications for their own self-images. But an incomplete understanding of theories of identity hampers them. So does their inconsistent treatment of emotion. The critics I have studied alternately reinscribe hegemonic notions of rationality and champion emotions which, without stating so clearly, they seem to find more authentic. The end result is a chaotic approach to value judgments. It seems that Weinstein had a point about a lack of consensual standards popular music journalists can refer to in order to make positive assessments. Poptimist discourse could lead the way toward

rectifying the situation, but so far its efforts have been too disorganized to be much help.

As a reader of poptimist music writing, I have another issue with many of the critics I have discussed—one that is highly subjective. I simply have a hard time believing in the purity of many of these critics' motivations. This is not to say that I doubt that Frere-Jones and Hopper care deeply about racism, that Wilson is questioning his elitism as he reaches middle age, or that any of the critics I have discussed have willingly misrepresented themselves. They seem to have a simultaneous awareness, whether it is entirely conscious or not, of how they stand to benefit from taking the stances they do. At times a hint of smugness creeps in, reminding me that critiquing elitism carries the fringe benefit or portraying oneself as a champion of the common man.

And there is no skirting the fact that poptimist controversy is good business. Wilson, Frere-Jones, Hopper, and Kogan all benefited from controversial pieces that raised their profile, and the increasing awareness of poptimism itself likely helped Tom Ewing to land his prestigious Pitchfork column (called, appropriately enough, Poptimist). Even opposing poptimism attracts attention, as critic Simon Reynolds, frequent antagonist to poptimists everywhere, can attest.

But the benefits of espousing poptimist views does not invalidate either critics' more admirable motivations or the potential positive impact of their work. After all, any effort to counteract cultural hegemony is likely to have some kind of fringe benefits, whether material (advancing one's career as an academic, writer,

professional organizer, etc.), social (gaining the approval of people whose opinion one values), or psychological (believing oneself to be a good person, exempting oneself from guilt about privilege). None of these nullify the good intentions behind such efforts or preclude their leading to real progress.

What has nagged at me during my analysis of poptimist discourse is the frequent failure of writers to thoroughly state their own investments in the positions they take. This is not to deny that a great deal of reflexivity, even downright soul-searching, goes on in poptimist writing. When Frere-Jones opens up about his qualms about emulating African-American performers as a musician, when Wilson admits to his own past snobbishness and queries his dislike of a popular recording artist, and when Kogan reflects on his desire to distinguish himself from other people, in each case their self-awareness leads to a great deal of insight.

However, the intense degree of self-scrutiny (and scrutiny of others, as in the case of the Merritt controversy) demonstrated in a great deal of poptimist writing makes any elision stand out even more. Kogan is admirably thorough in his self-disclosure, but his intense intellectualism (which at times means his writing is as dense and inaccessible as a challenging theoretical tome) keeps the affective impact of his revelations at an arm's length. Wilson is very hard on himself in retrospect, but fails to turn the same critical eye on his present-day behavior or the Céline project itself and in the process, neglects opportunities for greater understanding. Frere-Jones and Hopper fail to dig deeper into questions of racism and musical

reception in such a way that their condemnation of Merritt seems to hint that they are also congratulating themselves on their own lack of prejudice.

A cynical reading would say that the essential poptimist strategy is selective self-disclosure, employing a controlled amount of reflexivity that gives the appearance of openness but stops short of moving into truly risky territory. But I do not think that reading would be an accurate one. The limits of poptimist disclosure seem to stem from limited self-awareness rather than intentional omissions. If this is true, perhaps these incomplete revelations will pave the way for a greater degree of self-understanding on the part of poptimist critics, which could lead to more meaningful insights.

Looking at the big picture, the most important thing seems to be that poptimist critics have a real commitment to exploring issues like elitism and racism through which hegemonic power finds expression in popular culture. Even though examining these issues means braving the discomfort of confronting one's own privilege and risks putting off readers with realities they, too, might prefer to ignore, these critics have forged ahead. There are serious problems with the results of these efforts. Complex dynamics have been oversimplified, rigorous questioning has been inconsistently applied, and academic theory has been mutilated. The most harmful mistake, to my mind, is the manner in which Merritt was singled out for criticism for ethnocentric listening habits that he shares with multitudes of other people. An accusation of racism can be very damaging, and this one was applied to Merritt with apparent capriciousness.

Overall, though, poptimist critics seem to have both good intentions and laudable goals. Many of the problems with their efforts could be lessened, even eliminated, if supported by a communicative partnership with an active community of academics doing vital work on popular music. Under current conditions, journalists are in effect "picking up slack" for the underdeveloped state of popular music studies within the academy; much more could be accomplished if instead, both journalists and academics worked to their individual strengths and pooled their efforts. Whether or not this happens, I remain hopeful. Although poptimist efforts have met with many failures, the fact that these critics are committed to posing difficult questions about the impact of power structures on our culture is an undeniably positive development.

Bibliography

Bemis, Alec Hanley. "Guest Blogger: One View on the Chuck Eddy/Village Voice Situation," Coolfer, April 25, 2006, http://www.coolfer.com/blog/archives/2006/04/guest_blogger_o_1.php (accessed March 25, 2010).

Bérubé, Michael. "What's the Matter With Cultural Studies?" *The Chronicle Review*, September 14, 2009, http://chronicle.com/article/Whats-the-Matter-With/48334.

Bryson, Bethany. "'Anything But Heavy Metal': Symbolic Exclusion and Musical Dislikes," *American Sociological Review*, 61, no. 5, (Washington, D.C.: American Sociological Association, 1996): 884-99.

Cho, Alexander. "Lady Gaga Balls-Out: Recuperating Queer Performativity," FlowTV 10, (2009), http://flowtv.org/?p=4169.

Christgau, Robert. "Decade: Rockism Faces the World," *The Village Voice*, January 2, 1990. Archived at http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/rock/decade-89.php (accessed August 15, 2010).

"Cisgender," T-Vox, http://www.t-vox.org/index.php?title=Cisgender (accessed August 10, 2010).

Cook, John. "Blacklisted: Is Stephin Merritt a racist because he doesn't like hip-hop?" *Slate*, May 9, 2006, http://www.slate.com/id/2141421.

Ewing, Tom. "Poptimist #19: Fated to Pretend," November 6, 2008, http://pitchfork.com/features/poptimist/7549-poptimist-19/ (accessed June 13, 2010).

Experience Music Project, "2006 Pop Conference Bios/Abstracts," http://www.empsfm.org/education/index.asp?categoryID=26&ccID=127&xPopConfBioID=660&year=2006 (accessed March 25, 2010).

Fiske, John. "The Cultural Economy of Fandom," in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (New York: Routledge, 1992).

Fornäs, Johan. "Do You See Yourself? Reflected Subjectivities in Youthful Song Texts." *Young: Nordic Journal of Youth Research* 3, no. 2, (1995): 3-22.

———. "Listen to Your Voice! Authenticity and Reflexivity in Rock, Rap and Techno Music." *New Formations* 24 (1994): 155-173.

Fox, Aaron A. “White Trash Alchemies of the Abject Sublime: Country as ‘Bad’ Music,” in Washburne and Derko, *Bad Music*, 29-46.

Frere-Jones, Sasha. “Gerrymandering, on Ice,” S/FJ, May 16, 2004. http://sfj.abstractdynamics.org/archives/002900.html (accessed March 15, 2010).

———. “A Paler Shade of White,” *The New Yorker*, October 22, 2007, http://www .newyorker.com/arts/critics/musical/2007/10/22/071022crmu_music_frerejones.

———. “Best of 2007,” SF/J, December 19, 2006, http://www.sashafrerejones.com/2006/12/best_of_2007.html (accessed April 6, 2010).

———. “Best of 2008,” SF/J, December 29, 2007, http://www.sashafrerejones.com/2007/12/bumping.html (accessed April 6, 2010).

———. “Best of 2009,” SF/J, December 7, 2008, http://www.sashafrerejones.com/2008/12/best_of_2009.html (accessed April 6, 2010).

———. “Best of 2010,” SF/J, November 20, 2009, http://www.sashafrerejones.com/2009/11/best_of_2010_1.html (accessed April 6, 2010).

Fricker, Amanda. “Reason and Emotion,” *Radical Philosophy* 57, (1991): 14-19.

Frith, Simon. *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

———. “Music and Identity,” in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996).

Gracyk, Theodore. *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).

Greenwald, Andy. *Nothing Feels Good: Punk Rock, Teenagers, and Emo*. (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2003).

Hall, Stuart. “Gramsci’s Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity,” in *Stuart Hall: Critical dialogues in cultural studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen, (London: Routledge, 1996).

———. “New Ethnicities,” in Stuart Hall: Critical dialogues in cultural studies, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen, (London: Routledge, 1996), 441-9.

———. “Introduction: who needs ‘identity’?” in Hall and du Gay, *Questions of Cultural Identity*, 1-17.

Hall, Stuart and Paul du Gay, *Questions of Cultural Identity*. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996).

Hopper, Jessica. “Celine Dion is Unblack as Hell,” tinyluckygenius aka the Unicorn’s tear, April 28, 2006, http://tiny.abstractdynamics.org/archives/007723.html (accessed March 15, 2010).

———. “A Note,” tinyluckygenius aka the Unicorn’s tear, May 5, 2006, http://tiny.abstractdynamics.org/archives/007743.html (accessed March 15, 2010).

———. “I Called Stephin Merritt a Racist and All I Got Was This Lousy Blog Post,” tinyluckygenius aka the Unicorn’s tear, May 9, 2006, http://tiny.abstractdynamics .org/archives/007762.html (accessed March 15, 2006).

Jenkins, Henry. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

Kogan, Frank. “The reviews are cool but they burn out,” http://koganbot.livejournal .com/27681.html (accessed June 13, 2010).

———. “Rules of the Game No.31: Rockism and Antirockism Rise From the Dead,” Las Vegas Weekly News Blog, February 20, 2008, http://www.lasvegasweekly.com/ news/archive/2007/jun/11/rules-of-the-game-no-31-rockism-and-antirockis/ (accessed June 13, 2010).

———. “Rules of the Game Followup #2: Paris Is Our Vietnam,” Las Vegas Weekly News Blog, June 29, 2007, http://www.lasvegasweekly.com/news/archive/2007/ jun/11/rules-of-the-game-followup-2-paris-is-our-vietnam (accessed May 26, 2010).

———. *Real Punks Don’t Wear Black: Music Writing by Frank Kogan*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006).

Meier, Leslie M. “In Excess? Body Genres, ‘Bad’ Music, and the Judgment of Audiences,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 20, no. 3: 240-260.

Middleton, Jason and Roger Beebe. "The Racial Politics of Hybridity and 'Neo-Eclecticism' in Contemporary Popular Music." *Popular Music*, 21, no. 2 (2002): 159-172.

Mittell, Jason. "On Disliking Mad Men," Just TV, posted July 29, 2010, http://justtv .wordpress.com/2010/07/29/on-disliking-mad-men (accessed August 4, 2010).

Monson, Ingrid. "The Problem with White Hipness: Race, Gender, and Cultural Conceptions in Jazz Historical Discourse," in "Music Anthropologies and Music Histories," special issue, *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 48, no. 3, (1995): 396-422.

Moore, Allan. "Authenticity as Authentication," *Popular Music* 21, no. 2 (2002): 209-223.

Morley, Paul. "Rockism: it's the new rockism," The Guardian: Brief Encounters, posted May 26, 2006, http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2006/may/26/ popandrock.coldplay (accessed August 15, 2010).

Nehring, Neil. "'Everyone's Given Up and Just Wants to Go Dancing': From Punk to Rave in the Thatcher Era." *Popular Music and Society*, 30, no. 1 (2007): 1-18.

Peterson, Richard A. and Roger M. Kern. "Changing Highbrow Taste: From Snob to Omnivore," *American Sociological Review*, 61, no. 5, (Washington, D.C.: American Sociological Assocation, 1996), 900-907.

Powers, Ann. "Bratty by Nature," *Los Angeles Times*, July 27, 2008, http://articles .latimes.com/2008/jul/27/entertainment/ca-pop27.

———. "When Rock Stars Fake It," *Los Angeles Times*, July 12, 2009, http://articles .latimes.com/2009/jul/12/entertainment/ca-poptheatricality12.

Regev, Motti. "Producing Artistic Value: The Case of Rock Music." *The Sociological Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (1994): 85-102.

Reynolds, Simon. "Stuck in the middle with you: between pop and pretension," Guardian Music Blog, February 6, 2009, http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/ musicblog/2009/feb/06/simon-reynolds-animal-collective (accessed April 8, 2010).

———. "There's a Wyatt Going On," Blissblog, posted June 6, 2006, http://blissout.blogspot.com/2006_06_01_blissout_archive.html#11496205532413 0149 (accessed July 23, 2010).

———. “Thinking about that Greil Marcus quote that got uTopianTurtleTop riled up,” Blissblog, posted June 1, 2006, http://blissout.blogspot.com/2006/06/thinking-about-that-greil-marcus-quote.html (accessed July 23, 2010).

“Rockism,” Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rockism (accessed March 15, 2009).

Rosen, Jody. “The Perils of Poptimism: Does hating rock make you a music critic?” *Slate*, May 9, 2006, http://www.slate.com/id/2141418 (accessed August 4, 2010).

Sanneh, Kalefa. “The Rap Against Rockism,” *The New York Times*, October 31, 2004, http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/31/arts/music/31sann.html?ex=1256965200&en=5d74c31cbf3d2d34&ei=5090&partner=rssuserland.

Stosuy, Brandon. “Heavy Metal: It’s alive and flourishing.” *Slate*, August 19, 2005, http://www.slate.com/id/2124692 (accessed June 10, 2010).

Washburne, Christopher J. and Maiken Derno, eds. *Bad Music: The Music We Love to Hate*, (New York: Routledge, 2004).

Weinstein, Deena, “Rock Critics Need Bad Music,” in Washburne and Derno, *Bad Music*.

Wilson, Carl. *Céline Dion’s Let’s Talk About Love: A Journey to the End of Taste*. (New York: Continuum Publishing Group, 2007).

———. “Merritt Postscript: Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dad,” Zoilus, http://www.zoilus.com/documents/in-depth/2006/000761.php (accessed March 17, 2010).

———. “The Trouble With Indie Rock,” *Slate*, October 18, 2007, http://www.slate.com/id/2176187 (accessed April 8, 2010).

Vita

Susan Elizabeth Broyles was born in Germany, where her father was stationed in the military. She moved frequently as a child due to her father's job, living in Texas, Maryland, South Carolina, Hawaii, Kansas, and Georgia. She graduated from Central Lanier High School in Macon, Georgia in 1995. She attended Bard College as a Literature major for two years ending in the spring of 1997, and then she transferred to the University of Texas at Austin. She completed a Bachelor's Degree in English with a minor in Women's and Gender Studies there in 2001. She worked as an administrative staff member at the University for a number of years. During this time she took advantage of the school's staff educational benefit by enrolling in courses in the Radio-Television-Film department with Allucquere (Sandy) Stone and Mary Kearney and completing an undergraduate thesis in Women's and Gender Studies under the supervision of Janet Staiger. She entered the Master's program in Radio-Television-Film in the fall of 2006.

Permanent Address: 5609 Clay Ave. Unit B
Austin, Texas 78756

This thesis was typed by the author.